



CROSSROADS

A Journal of English Studies

ISSUE 7

4/2014

An electronic journal published
by The University of Bialystok



ISSUE 7

4/2014



An electronic journal published by The University of Białystok



Publisher:

The University of Białystok
The Faculty of Philology
Department of English
ul. Liniarskiego 3
15-420 Białystok, Poland
tel. 0048 85 7457516
✉ crossroads@uwb.edu.pl
🌐 www.crossroads.uwb.edu.pl

e-ISSN 2300-6250

The electronic version of *Crossroads. A Journal of English Studies* is its primary (referential) version.

Editor-in-chief:

Agata Rozumko

Editorial Board:

Zdzisław Głębocki, Jerzy Kamionowski,
Daniel Karczewski, Ewa Lewicka-Mroczek,
Grzegorz Moroz, Kirk Palmer, Jacek Partyka,
Dorota Potocka, Dorota Szymaniuk, Anna Tomczak

Editorial Assistants:

Weronika Łaszkiwicz, Ewa Tołoczko

Language editors:

Kirk Palmer, Peter Foulds

Advisory Board:

Pirjo Ahokas (University of Turku), Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (SWPS: University of Social Sciences and Humanities), Xinren Chen (Nanjing University), Marianna Chodorowska-Pilch (University of Southern California), Zinaida Charytończyk (Minsk State Linguistic University), Gasparyan Gayane (Yerevan State Linguistic University "Bryusov"), Marek Gołębiowski (University of Warsaw), Anne-Line Graedler (Hedmark University College), Cristiano Furiassi (Università degli Studi di Torino), Jarosław Krajka (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University / University of Social Sciences and Humanities), Marcin Krygier (Adam Mickiewicz University), A. Robert Lee (Nihon University), Elżbieta Mańczak –-Wohlfeld (Jagiellonian University), Zbigniew Maszewski (University of Łódź), Michael W. Thomas (The Open University, UK), Sanae Tokizane (Chiba University), Peter Unseth (Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics, Dallas)

Contents

4 ARTICLES

4 Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as a Social Chronicle of 20th Century Canada

13 Jerzy Kamionowski

The "Color-Line" Criticism: Literary Fiction, Historical Facts, and the Critical Controversies about William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

23 Grzegorz Moroz

Oxford Travel Book Writers and Gentlemen-Scholars: Constructing Narrative Personae in Aldous Huxley's *The Jestling Pilate*, Robert Byron's *The Station* and Evelyn Waugh's *Remote People*

33 Stephen Oladele Solanke

Mythotypes and Sociological Imports in the Apartheid World of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

46 NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk

University of Białystok

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as a Social Chronicle of 20th Century Canada

Abstract. The aim of this article is to demonstrate through Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* the social changes that took place in 20th century Canada. Depicting the fall of a once respected Toronto bourgeois family of Chase, the book covers the period from the early 1900s through World War I, the Depression years, and World War II to the late 1990s. By situating the story of the Chase sisters against the broader backdrop of Canadian history, Atwood presents the transformation from the rigidly divided society of the past into an egalitarian society of the present day Canada. To give *The Blind Assassin* a deeper sense of history the author incorporated into the novel various documents from the past, such as newspaper clippings. Although many of these cuttings are of Atwood's contriving and were merely inspired by actual events, they allow the author, through the use of pastiche, to poke fun at a number of dominant ideologies of the past and highlight how profound and inevitable the social changes of the last century were.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Canada, memory, social change, class division, feminism.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the social changes that took place in 20th century Canada as exemplified in Margaret Atwood's Booker Prize winning novel *The Blind Assassin*. Depicting the fall of the once respected bourgeois Chase family, Atwood covers the period from the early 1900s through World War I, the Depression years, and World War II, to the late 1990s. Situating the action of the novel against the broader backdrop of Canadian history allowed the author to present the transformation from the rigidly divided society of the past into the egalitarian society of contemporary Canada and – what is intrinsically linked with it – the shift in mainstream social values. Apart from class division, the book touches upon such issues as the position of women, parent-child relations, national identity and multiculturalism, among many. As the author herself aptly notes:

fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. ... fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge ourselves. (Atwood in Staines 2006:23)

Before investigating the subject matter of the article it seems essential to respond to the question of why so many Canadian writers turned to the historical novel during the last two decades of the 20th century, a century whose “most characteristic and eerie phenomena (sic)”, according to Hobbyist (in Parr 2001:719), is the “destruction of the past, or rather the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations.”¹ In other words, Canadians’ growing fascination with their own history went against the general trend of the late 20th century, which, in Atwood’s (2005:162) opinion, was “on the whole more interested in forgetting—forgetting as an organic process, and sometimes a willed act.” One of the explanations for this peculiar phenomenon has been offered by the author herself, namely, that it is a “part of a worldwide movement that has found writers and readers, especially in ex-colonies, turning towards their own roots, while not rejecting developments in the imperial centres” (Atwood 2005:168). It appears that it is the generation of writers contemporary to Atwood that were the first to recognise the necessity for rediscovering their country’s roots in terms of history and literature, or art in general. Not coincidentally, this is also the generation that as students were told there was no such thing as Canadian culture, and were taught European or specifically English history, culture and literature instead. Staines (2006:13) observes that “In the fifties Canada was a country not conversant with its own cultural identity.” Looking back at her school days, Atwood (2005:163) wryly reminisces that the Canadian history courses she attended nearly always came down to “the statistics on wheat and the soothing assurances that all was well in the land of the cow and the potato”, and complains that she was never taught “who inhabited this space before white Europeans arrived, bearing gifts of firearms and smallpox”. Thus, it seemed inevitable that as mature writers in search for their own identity—both individual and national—these authors would resort to history, or more precisely Canadian history, for as Atwood (in Staines 2006: 25-6) elucidates: “Refusing to acknowledge where you come from [...] is an act of amputation: you may become free floating, a citizen of the world [...] but only at the cost of arms, legs or heart. By discovering your place you discover yourself.” Therefore, after the critical success of *Alias Grace*, Atwood once more turned to the historical novel genre. However, due to its extremely complex narrative structure, *The Blind Assassin* is not entirely a historical novel, for it features a novel inside the primary text, and science fiction stories inside the inner novel.

Nevertheless, the backbone of *The Blind Assassin* is a memoir written by 82-year-old Iris Chase, in which she spins the story of her life, as well as that of her younger sibling Laura. The sisters were born to an affluent factory owner, Norval Chase, and his Methodist wife in the second decade of the previous century in the fictional town of Port Ticonderoga. Though of the author’s contriving, the town is “a composite of three exceptionally pretty southern Ontario towns: Elora, Paris and St. Mary’s” (Bemrose 2000:55), and offers a fairly reliable reconstruction of small town life in Canada during World War I and the Depression years. However, since, as has already been outlined,

¹ The popularity of the historical novel in Canada goes back to the 1970s, although it is in the 1980s and 90s that, as Atwood (2005:167) observes, “the trend intensified”. To support her point she enlists the following authors: Graeme Gibson, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, Brian Moore, Alice Munro, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Jane Urquhart, Carol Shield, and Timothy Findley.

the primary text is a memoir, the family saga is presented from Iris's point of view and is totally dependent on her memory. On a number of occasions the protagonist herself contemplates how selective and fallible memory can be, or how the very same events may be differently interpreted and memorized by individuals. These ponderings on the nature of memory and text, represented here by the memoir, emphasize the fact that the novel is more concerned with the 'act of enunciating' than the enunciation itself. By stressing the relativity of the viewpoint, Iris encourages the reader to ponder upon the fact that her version of events may not necessarily be the only possible version. In fact, she repeatedly makes the reader doubt and wonder "how reliable is memory itself—our individual memory, or our collective memory as a society?" (Atwood 2005:161). But if, as has previously been mentioned, Canadian collective memory was non-existent for such a long time, maybe it is the memory of individuals such as Iris that can facilitate the process of retrieving the common past? Since time immemorial numerous philosophers have argued the importance of the past, understood by the broad term 'memory'. John Locke, for instance, overtly linked the self with memory, and asserted that "selfhood consists entirely in continuity of memory" (Labudova 2005:262): I remember, therefore I am. Analogously, it may be argued then that collective memory is a guarantee of a nation's survival, and Atwood herself seems to ascribe to this point of view in *The Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*: "For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive" (in Laskowska 2005:291).

However unreliable a narrator Iris may appear to be (all in all, she was a participant in the outlined events), many critics agree that, as Hite (2001: 2) couches it, she "has the gift for slightly distanced, marveling observation that distinguishes all of Atwood's best protagonists." But there is certainly one advantage of learning the story from her, namely, her commentary, for although she attempts to be objective in presenting the actual events, she cannot help evaluating them from today's perspective. Although the portrait of various social classes depicted in *The Blind Assassin* may be marked by Iris's attitudes towards them, such as sentiments, hostility or pity, some things, namely events, are beyond subjectivity; after all, the events either took place or never happened. Likewise, social changes may have been received and perceived differently depending on the individual, but it is undeniable that they did occur, regardless of people's attitudes towards them.

To foreground the status of *The Blind Assassin* as a historical novel the author incorporated into the book various documents from the past, such as newspaper clippings. Although many of these cuttings are of Atwood's contriving and were merely inspired by actual events, they allow the author, through the use of pastiche, to poke fun at a number of dominant ideologies of the past, and to highlight how profound and inevitable the social changes of the last century were. Thus, *The Blind Assassin* is to a large extent "a social commentary on Canada—from its colonial heyday through fully-fledged industrialisation, labour unrest, and the battle of democratic and fascist ideologies" (Davies 2001:1138) or, as Bemrose (2000:55) maintains, the book "is driven at least in part by a desire to dissect social realities." Atwood herself points out that Canadians "pretend that classes don't exist in [their] society", and adds that "it's time to think about the issue of class again"

(Atwood in Bemrose 2000:55). She seems to be particularly critical of the upper class, who, to use her own words, have “a common interest in making conditions better for themselves” (Atwood in Bemrose 2000:55). All these contemplations can be found in the book under consideration, but the true critique of the social system of early 20th century Canada is offered through the science fiction story about the city of Sakiel-Norn.

This sci-fi story, told by the unnamed *he* of the inner novel to his lover, serves “as a mirror-text of the primary narrative” (Staels 2004:160). In the course of the book, however, we learn that the anonymous sci-fi writer is Alex Thomas, a young supporter of the labour movement, or as Richard Griffen describes him “an armchair pinko”, while his secret lover is Iris Chase (Atwood 2000:193). By spinning the tale of the rigidly divided society of the mythical city of Zycron, Alex endeavours to make Iris reject her blindness and finally see her own upper-class complacency as well as her own (self-)victimization. The choice of the science fiction genre may be accounted for by the need for the defamiliarisation of the context. Similarly to Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels*, Atwood makes use of satire to pillory the socio-political order. For that purpose, both narrators – Gulliver and Alex – elucidate the system allegedly alien to their listeners – the horse and Iris respectively – and point out its absurdities or atrocities. Tomashevsky illustrates the function of Swift’s narrator, and correspondingly Atwood’s one as well, in the following way:

Compelled to tell everything with the utmost accuracy, he removes the shell of euphemistic phrases and fictitious traditions which justify such things as war, class strife, parliamentary intrigue and so on. Stripped of their verbal justification and thus defamiliarised, these topics emerge in all their horror. Thus criticism of the political system – nonliterary material – is artistically motivated and fully involved in the narrative. (Tomashevsky in Selden 1989:11)

The society of Sakiel-Norn is comprised of two classes—aristocrats, known as Snilfards, and smallholders, serfs and slaves, referred to as Ygniroids. The upper crust naturally has all possible privileges and leads a comfortable life, while the life of the lower orders is fraught with suffering and self-denial. From time to time Ygniroids “would stage a revolt, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed”, which most likely is a reference to labour unrest and factory strikes during the Depression years (Atwood 2000:18). The whole economy of the mythical city is based on the exploitation of slaves, whose primary function is carpet weaving until they go blind and are then sold to local brothel owners. If they are lucky and courageous enough to escape, they eventually become blind assassins, hence the title of the novel. The fact that the story of Sakiel-Norn is a parable for pillorying the social system of 1930s and 40s Canada is conspicuous in the following conversation between Alex, the critic, and Iris, the incarnation of the Canadian bourgeoisie:

They [blind assassins] didn’t have much choice, did they? They couldn’t become the carpet-merchants themselves, or the brothel owners. They didn’t have the capital. So they had to take the dirty work. Tough luck for them.
Don’t, she says. It’s not my fault. (Atwood 2000:25)

Iris also calls Alex a Bolshevik when he announces that upward mobility in the city of Sakiel-Norn is not really a viable option, unlike the reverse situation, for “If a Snilfard should become bankrupt, he might be demoted to an Ygnirod” (Atwood 2000:18). At the very top of the social ladder of Sakiel-Norn is a heartless tyrant bearing a marked resemblance to Iris’s husband, Richard Griffen, who is subsequently the embodiment of ruthless capitalism or, as Alex calls him in the primary narrative, “the sweatshop tycoon”.

Nevertheless, the novel’s subject matter also revolves around the issue of the social position of women throughout the 20th century, for, as Atwood (in Staines 2006:17) argues, “The goals of feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject”. Once again the aforementioned sci-fi parable provides a number of observations on the topic. As Bouson (2003:251) states:

in *The Blind Assassin* science fiction tale, Atwood, through repetitive retellings of the story of women’s sexual victimization, probes the cultural—and historical—repetition of sexual violence against women, showing the link between institutionalized misogyny and the sexual traumatization of women.

Indeed, the tragic fate of the sacrificial tongueless virgins of Sakiel-Norn, who the night before the votive ceremony are raped by the Lord of the Underworld, mirrors the sad plight of the Chase sisters. Although Iris and Laura represent two distinct attitudes towards social expectations and limitations imposed on them by the patriarchal society of early 20th century Canada, both of them fall victim to sexual and mental abuse inflicted by the men surrounding them, and both suffer their lot in silence, like the mute sacrificial virgins from Alex’s tale. It takes Iris nearly fifty years to shatter the silence and learn speech again, to tell *her* story of official history (also read as *his* story). As Vevaina (2006:89) observes, “Atwood’s interest in the past of the formerly excluded ‘ex-centrics’ (as both off-centre and decentred) leads her to contribute to the body of knowledge which Linda Hutcheon has called ‘archival women history’”, and adds that “By taking us back into the past through her fictive reconstructions of history, Atwood seeks to make readers aware of our present state” (Vevaina 2006:97). In other words, through the sci-fi tale the writer seems to be querying if the contemporary society has truly become an equal one in terms of gender, and to what extent institutionalized misogyny is a thing of the past. It is worth observing that in the city of Sakiel-Norn children were offered to two different gods, depending on their sex:

Boy children were offered to the God of the Three Suns, who was the god of daytime, bright lights, palaces, feasts, furnaces, wars, liquor, entrances, and words; girl children were offered to the Goddess of the Five Moons, patroness of night, mists and shadows, famine, caves, childbirth, exits, and silences.
(Atwood 2000:30)

Thus, it may be concluded that from early infancy disparate gendered social roles are ascribed to each sex. Namely, the male domain is public speech and the limelight, while the female realm is reduced to child rearing and keeping a low profile. As has already been noted, the sci-fi story functions as Iris’s eye-opener to the social injustices of her world, as through the tale Alex Thomas

“fictionalizes the painful facts of Iris’s life, thereby holding a distorted mirror reflection up to her private story, a familiar, though repressed one” (Staels 2004:154). When he narrates that a bankrupt Snilfard could avoid being demoted to the lower orders of Ygnirods by selling his wife or children, Alex alludes to Iris’s economically-conditioned marriage to Richard, which was meant to save her father’s factory from bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, the primary narrative also offers many instances of social changes in other spheres of life. The family saga opens with the description of Iris’s grandmother Adelia, from the respected Montfort family, who were affluent once but by the beginning of the 20th century had lost most of their fortune. Thus, at the age of twenty-three, “which was counted over the hill in those days”, Adelia was forced to marry money through her union with Benjamin Chase, the local button factory owner (Atwood 2000:62). Brought up in an aristocratic family, she wanted culture above all, and did everything she could to refine the crude button money of her husband by throwing twelve-course dinners for important guests and designing the Chase mansion, Avilion. What is noteworthy, however, above all is her Old Continent complex. She missed the artistic salons which she had a chance to frequent while holidaying in England in the days when her family still prospered. Her obsession with the displays of European culture, be it a garden statue, a family tomb with two Victorian angels, or a Christmas card inscription, made her a laughing stock among the townspeople. Even Iris seems to poke fun at her grandmother’s pretenses when commenting on her choice of the motto for a Christmas card: “Tennyson was somewhat out of date, by English standards—Oscar Wilde was in the ascendant then, at least among the younger set—but then, everything in Port Ticonderoga was somewhat out of date” (Atwood 2000:64). Notwithstanding, Iris is not critical of her grandmother as such, but rather envisages her as a romantic heroine trapped in a monotonous, loveless marriage to a well-off manufacturer. Noteworthy then is the fact that her grandma’s sentiments for England and European culture seem quaint but alien to the 82-year-old Iris, who seems to have a very strong sense of being Canadian.

Unlike her extravagant mother-in-law, Liliana, Iris’s mother, was a down-to-earth thrifty woman, more preoccupied with helping the underprivileged than raising her two daughters. And it must be stressed that among many social phenomena it is the parent-child relationship that has changed the most over the last century. Both Chase sisters are basically brought up by their housemaid Reenie, for their mother dies when Iris and Laura are nine and six years old, respectively. However, during her life Liliana did not really spend much time nurturing her offspring, either. The few scenes describing family life display restraint rather than love and affection between the family members. Iris reminisces: “Her comportment as a mother had always been instructive rather than cherishing. At heart she remained a schoolteacher” (Atwood 2000:88). Liliana must have believed that her primary maternal obligation was to acquaint the girls with social protocol and to teach self-sacrifice, which is respectively mirrored in the mother’s constant reminders to “sit up straight and to eat the crusts” (Atwood 2000:90). What is more, neither of their parents told the girls about their affection for them; it was something that was taken for granted—“parents were supposed to love their children”, Iris notes (Atwood 2000:105). Later, this inability to express emotions openly,

or to even acknowledge them, will place a great strain on Iris's relationship with her own daughter Aimee. Not surprisingly, Iris's ties with her father are not any closer than those with her mother, which is quite salient in the following scene:

He'd begun insisting that Laura and I have breakfast with him, instead of in the kitchen with Reenie, as before. We sat at one end of the long table, he sat at the other. He rarely spoke to us: he read the paper instead, and we were too in awe of him to interrupt. (We worshiped him, of course. It was either that or hate him. He did not invite the more moderate emotions.) (Atwood 2000:102)

The only interest Norval Chase displays in his older daughter is when he resolves to prepare her for inheriting and subsequently managing the button factory or, more sadly, when he outlines to her the possibility of her saving the factory from collapse by marrying a much older prosperous manufacturer, Richard Griffen. The absence of attachment to a young child could be easily accounted for by the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century "one child in four did not survive infancy" (Morton 2000:25). However, the lack of bonding in the later years of a child's development is quite difficult both to explain and imagine from today's perspective.

It may be observed altogether that the familial relationships between the women in the novel are given more prominence than those between men, or men and women. This might be connected with Steenman-Marcusses's claim that "one way for a Canadian woman to know herself is to read about her predecessors" (Laskowska 2005:289). This may also constitute the ultimate explanation of why Iris herself is writing the memoir, namely, for her long gone granddaughter Sabrina. By providing her grandchild with an allegedly true account of the family saga, including the suffering inflicted on female family members by Richard and his vicious sister Winifred, Iris hopes to free Sabrina from the burden of shame and allegations that befell the family after Richard's suicide. By disclosing the name of the girl's real grandfather, that is Alex Thomas, the grandmother allows Sabrina to make a fresh start, to rediscover herself and her own identity.

Notwithstanding, the novel also offers observations on other social transformations, for example the multi-ethnicity of contemporary Canadian society, which is juxtaposed with the fear of outsiders in the 1930s and 40s, as demonstrated through the townspeople's resentment towards the character Alex Thomas. Some decades later, during an honour student awards event at a local school, to which she was invited as the last surviving member of the Griffen Family, Iris presents a cheque to a girl of apparently foreign background:

She walked towards me, heels clicking across the stage. She was tall; they're all very tall these days, young girls, it must be something in the food. ... An oval face, a mouth done in cerise lipstick; a slight frown, focused, intent. Skin with a pale-yellow or brown undertint—could she be Indian, or Arabian, or Chinese? Even in Port Ticonderoga such a thing was possible: everyone is everywhere nowadays. (Atwood 2000:43)

At the very same ceremony, when hearing the national anthem, Iris also comments on the birth of national identity in Canada and its separation from British rule. Interestingly, it was not until

June 18 1980 that “O Canada!” was officially recognized as the new national anthem, superseding “God Save the Queen”. However, the forthcoming passage further allows Iris to allude to volatile relations between Quebec and English-speaking parts of the country in a typically Atwoodian wry style:

The school orchestra struck up with squeaks and flats, and we sang “O Canada!” the words to which I can never remember because they keep changing them. Nowadays they do some of it in French, which once would have been unheard of. We sat down, having affirmed our collective pride in something we can’t pronounce. (Atwood 2000:40)

In her recollections Iris also remarks on the sexual revolution, which changed the mentality of even small town people, or depicts the social implications of World War I, both of which, until the 1970s, were of no interest to Canadian historians, but which seem to lie at the very heart of *The Blind Assassin* in its account of the second decade of 20th century Canada. However, the novel also comprises truly hilarious passages that reflect the universal changes in lifestyle; since these changes are often precipitated by the process of globalization they are familiar to every reader, regardless of their cultural background, be it Canada or Poland, as demonstrated in the following excerpt about Betty’s Luncheonette:

chicken pot pies were the speciality once, but they’re long gone. There are hamburgers, but Myra says to avoid them. She says they use pre-frozen patties made of meat dust. Meat dust, she says, is what is scraped up off the floor after they’ve cut up frozen cows with an electric saw. She reads a lot of magazines, at the hairdresser’s. (Atwood 2000:47)

The image of women from all over the world flicking through glossy magazines replete with advertisements for the same beauty products and household appliances, or offered cappuccino and tortellini at their local diners makes us acutely aware of the fact that the world is shrinking and cultural differences are progressively being blurred. Perhaps that is yet another reason to attempt to preserve those cultural elements that make a country unique, be they its cuisine or history, and that is partially the role the novel under discussion performs.

To conclude, *The Blind Assassin* is not only an engrossing family saga with a number of skeletons in the cupboard, which could just as well have been entitled “The Fall of the House of Chase”, but it is also a close study of the social realities of 20th century Canada, with emphasis put on the 1930s and 40s. If, as Eagleton (1983:185) maintains, any narrative is based on the ‘fort-da game’ principle, in which an “original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored”, *The Blind Assassin* is primarily a novel concerned with retrieving what has either been lost or forgotten. Regaining the past is often a painful process because it makes us realize that something or someone is indeed gone; “fort’ has meaning only in relation to ‘da” (Eagleton 1983:186). By recollecting early 20th century Toronto, Iris Chase highlights the fact that such a place does not exist anymore, except in people’s memory and literature. After all, as Atwood (2005:158) points out, “Fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions”.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. 2000. *The Blind Assassin*. New York: Anchor Books.
- , 2005. *Writing with Intent. Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1983-2005*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.
- Bemrose, John. 2000. Margaret's Museum. *Maclean's* 09 Nov. 54-56.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. 2003. A Commemoration of Wounds Endured and Resented: Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as Feminist Memoir. *Critique* Spring. 251-269.
- Davies, Rebecca J. 2001. Dissecting the Narrative. *Lancet* 04 July. 1138.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hite, Molly. 2001. Tongueless in Toronto. *Women's Review of Books* March. 1-3.
- Labudova, Katarina. 2005. Houses, Clothes, and Pregnant Women. Re-construction of Memory and Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*. In: Magdalena Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek, Anna Reczyńska and Anna Śpiewak (eds.), *Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives*, 259-267. Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności.
- Laskowska, Małgorzata. 2005. Reinterpretations of Susanna Moodie by Margaret Atwood as an Example of Creative Recycling of the Past. In: Magdalena Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek, Anna Reczyńska and Anna Śpiewak (eds.), *Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives*, 289-308. Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności.
- Morton, Desmond. 2000. 1900: A New Century Begins. *Beaver* Dec 99/Jan 2000. 23-29.
- Parr, Joy. 2001. CHR Forum. Introduction. *The Canadian Historical Review* Dec. 719.
- Selden, Raman. 1989. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Staels, Hilde. 2004. Margaret Atwood's Specular Narrative: The Blind Assassin. *English Studies* April. 147-160.
- Staines, David. 2006. Margaret Atwood in her Canadian context. In: Coral Ann Howells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, 12-27. Cambridge: CUP.
- Vevaina, Coomi. S. 2006. Margaret Atwood and history. In: Coral Ann Howells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, 86-99. Cambridge: CUP.

Jerzy Kamionowski
University of Bialystok

The “Color-Line” Criticism: Literary Fiction, Historical Facts, and the Critical Controversies about William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Abstract. This article analyses critical responses to William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, claiming that the reception of the novel was strongly determined by the question of race and the different perception-and-interpretation of a “common” history by black and white Americans. I demonstrate that the polemics about Styron’s novel resulted not only from an entirely different understanding by white and black critics of the question as to what literature is essentially and what social role it has to perform, but also from the incompatible implementation of historiography, in the realm of which both sides placed the novel. I argue that, as a result, the critical controversies about *The Confessions* were drawn along the so-called “color line”, a category which traditionally defined Americans according to their race.

Keywords: American history, color line, criticism, historical facts, historical novel, literary fiction, race, slavery.

When Amiri Baraka – the poet and playwright who had initiated the Black Arts Movement four decades before (a movement which demanded from African American artists that they practice art ideologically and politically engaged) – performed in 2002 “Somebody Blew Up America,” his poem-reaction to the September 11 terrorist attack, the American press and media exploded in a debate about the limits of what can be expressed in literature in a society with a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech. The poet was accused of antisemitism and anti-Americanism. In the opinion of some literary critics, myself included, Baraka was wrongfully accused. Among the “means of persuasion” used by his opponents was an attempt to remove him from the position of Poet Laureate of New Jersey. Due to the fact that the poet did not remain silent – he gave many interviews and published a statement in the leftist magazine *Counterpunch*, in which he explained why he had refused the New Jersey Governor’s call for him to resign. (Because there was no provision in the law for removing a state poet laureate, state authorities decided to abolish the post altogether.) One

conspicuous feature of the campaign against Baraka was that his critics concentrated solely on the alleged ideological message of the poem and completely ignored its strictly artistic dimension. Few articles took into consideration or even mentioned the poem's literary value, its original poetics, the variety of means of expression used, the virtuosic implementation of non-standard linguistic forms characteristic of so-called "black speech," its jazz-inspired rhythm, and the fact that it belongs in the long American tradition of politically engaged poetry (see: Gwiazda 2004; and Kamionowski 2011).

I am recalling this almost-contemporary event as a context to the comparably violent and tempestuous response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a novel published in 1967. As in the case of Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America," the reception of Styron's novel was strongly determined by the question of race and the different perception and interpretation of a "common" history by black and white Americans. Those two issues focused the controversies about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. However, it needs to be pointed out that the literary critics, writers, historians, and sociologists who defended Styron and his novel against the attacks of "black radicals," attempted to concentrate the discussion on historical facts, formal literary questions, and the "universal" message of the book, entirely separating it from its racial context and from ideological arguments about history, including the contemporary history taking place "here and now," at the end of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the fact that Styron received for *The Confessions of Nat Turner* two prestigious literary awards – the Pulitzer Prize in 1968 and the Howells Medal for Fiction in 1970 (the latter granted every five years for the best novel of that period) – seems to have an ideological aspect to it, and can be perceived as a kind of demonstration of the power of American intellectual elites to decide who receives literary prizes and other prestigious distinctions; even more so in the context of what happened to Baraka a decade ago. Apparently Styron willingly took part in this game when he, unlike Baraka, distanced himself from any ideological questions in the interviews and meetings with his readers that followed the publication of the novel.

In a speech that he made on the occasion of receiving the Howells Medal for Fiction, Styron said:

By recognizing *Nat Turner* this award really honors all of those of my contemporaries who have steadfastly refused to write propaganda or indulge in myth-making but have been impelled to search instead for those insights which, however raggedly and imperfectly, attempt to demonstrate the variety, the quirkiness, the fragility, the courage, the good humor, desperation, corruption, and mortality of all men. And finally it ratifies my own conviction that a writer jeopardizes his very freedom by insisting that he be bound or defined by his race, or by almost anything else. (Styron 1982: 226-227)

Yet how can one be sure that Styron – the apologist of an unrestrained artistic freedom – is not defined and limited by his own race? Does the fact that he describes his writerly intentions in terms of "universal" human experience provide such certainty? Moreover, the words he uses, such as "propaganda" and "myth-making," obviously serve the purpose of depreciating the standpoint of the most fervent and negative voices among the novel's criticism and, though not stated directly, refer to the articles and comments of those black critics who not only had voiced a number of

concrete reservations about the novel but also launched a frontal attack against its author, a representative sample of which comprises the book *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* published in 1968.

However, the fact that this attack was carried out in a peremptorily hysterical tone characteristic of the ideological rabidness of the Black Arts Movement period does not necessarily mean that the accusations formulated against Styron do not contain at least a grain of truth (the mechanism of a rejection of the merit of a linguistic statement on the basis of its unacceptably “too emotional” form has been recognized and described by feminist critics – for instance Dale Spender, in her book *Man Made Language*). Arguably, Styron's statements in the interviews collected in the volume titled *Conversations with William Styron* not only are identical – in terms of tone and content – with the extract from his acceptance speech for the Howells Medal quoted above, but also read like examples of the language of the “solipsistic universal” whose distinctive feature is, according to Craig Werner, the fact that “[m]embers of the dominant group, typically unaware of the unstated premises of their behavior ... proceed as if by serving their own interests they were serving the ultimate good” (Werner 1986: 62).

Reading critical articles and comments on Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* – frequently written in a polemical form and characterized by a confrontational tone – it is difficult to resist the impression that both sides of the conflict tried hard to play with marked cards and ascribe various dishonest intentions and manipulative purposes to their adversaries, claiming objectivity and impartiality for themselves. But even worse is the fact that the controversies about Styron's novel were drawn along the so-called “color line,” a category which traditionally defined Americans according to their race; hence, attempts to overcome the controversies seem to have been doomed to failure from the very start. Undoubtedly, the vitriolic language of the attack on Styron used in the essays by the ten black writers, and the implementation of invective such as “racist,” “liar,” and “supporter of slavery,” or accusing him of “moral cowardice” must be perceived as exaggerated if not directly abusive. Nonetheless, many of the claims and observations made by the white critics, though expressed in a much more balanced manner, must raise similar doubts.

The most important differences in perception of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared within two closely connected spheres: first, Styron's treatment of historical facts and events; and second, the writer's representation of the historical Nat Turner. These two questions became important for discussion of the novel not only because of the problem of faithfulness to historical truth about the event which provided the theme of the novel, but also because, as John Thompson (1982: 163) puts it, although “[t]he book aspires to be more than a tract, yet today [i.e. at a time of racial protests which often took the form of riots], a book about a Negro who leads other Negroes to murder men, women, and children solely because they are white, cannot avoid becoming the matter of editorials, sermons, panels, and shouting matches.” Apparently, it was the immediate social context that provoked such fervent polemics.

Styron's novel treats about a slave rebellion (called at that time an “insurrection”) started in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 by Nat Turner, who gathered a group of supporters recruited

both among the slaves from the neighborhood and black freemen. The group began its march on a local town, Jerusalem, killing on its way white families in their houses. The insurrection lasted only a few days during which the rebels killed fifty-five white men, women and children, using hatchets, axes, knives, and blunt tools. Turner himself murdered only one person – a young white woman whose name was Margaret Whitehead. The rebellion was suppressed by intervention of the white militia, and its participants taken to court. Eighteen of them – including the leader – were sentenced to death by hanging; the others were acquitted or sold out of state. Simultaneously, in the county where the insurrection took place, its white inhabitants carried out a series of pogroms and murdered over two hundred black people.

Nonetheless, Styron does not limit himself to an external relation of those dramatic events in a novelistic form, but gives the narrative voice to Nat Turner himself who tells his own life story. This formal decision results from the author's belief that the reason for the rebellion must be looked for in its leader's psychology. In many interviews given after the publication of the novel, Styron emphasizes that writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* he was interested in finding an answer to the question why such a bloody slave rebellion happened in Virginia, where the system of slavery was relatively mild, and, what is more, at a time when there was a debate going on as to whether slavery should not be abolished altogether in the state. It must be remembered, however, that this debate was not initiated for humanitarian reasons, but because of the fact that Virginia was experiencing economic dire straits: its very intensive tobacco cultivation had led to impoverishment of the soil, and many farmers simply could not afford to keep slaves anymore.

But let us go back to the of controversies about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The polemical arguments concerning the first issue – i.e. the faithfulness to the historical facts and events Styron's novel draws upon – concentrated on the problem to what extent any literary fiction based on real events and historical characters must or should respect their integrity, and to what extent it is acceptable to modify them for the sake of art itself. As George Core (1981: 212) points out, obviously Styron did not follow E. M. W. Tillyard's observations pertaining to the characteristics of a well-written historical novel, among which the scholar mentions two fundamental rules: first, never to concentrate too much on major historical figures; and second, to avoid representing in detail major historical events. According to the critic, by respecting those rules a novelist protects the literary art from becoming entirely dependent on history. In "Author's Note," which precedes the text of the novel, Styron says:

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events. (Styron 1967: n. p.)
(emphasis in original)

And he adds immediately that his work is "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history." (Styron 1967: n. p.)

As Styron says himself, he took his knowledge of the facts he draws on in the novel from two sources: a twenty-page long confession that was made by Nat Turner in prison during the three days which preceded his execution and written down by a lawyer named Thomas R. Gray (which gave the idea for the title of the novel), and from William S. Drewry's Ph.D. dissertation *The Southampton Insurrection* (1900).

Nevertheless, even if we strongly believe in and respect the autonomy of literature, we should not disregard the fact that a narrativisation of historical events always has a powerful influence on their perception in the mass imagination and that – identically to the case of chronicles and scholarly historical works – selection of material is absolutely vital: things omitted frequently turn out to be as important as those preserved and thoroughly researched. Therefore, even though the majority of white critics praised Styron's novel for capturing the essence of slavery in universally human categories, it is impossible to discredit Mike Thelwell's valid comment that it is difficult to talk about the essence without a substance.

Yet despite his argumentation being the most eloquent and persuasive among the ten black writers, Thelwell himself, when he points out the lack of a solid background that would confront the reader with the scale of cruelty of the American system of slavery, seems to forget that this "deficiency" results from the fact that the novel has the form of a first-person narrative with a personal point of view, whose rule is the limitation of the narrator's awareness. Not only does he not take it into consideration, but also attempts to instruct the author (and other writers who would like to take up the topic) how such a novel should be written and what it should contain in order to meet with the acceptance of black radicals. In this respect Thelwell and many other black critics at that period practice a sort of prescriptive literary criticism, derivative of the concept of the Black Aesthetic which had provided an obligatory system of evaluation of art for African American critics of the younger generation. In those circles the autonomy of literature was extremely curtailed by the ideological and political needs of the moment.

Thus it is not surprising that in a situation where the standpoints of black and white critics were so strongly polarized, it was difficult if not entirely impossible to find compromise when discussing general issues. Nonetheless, quite surprisingly there were also a few very concrete issues which revealed a profound gap between the white and black critical positions. One of them was the loyalty of the slaves to their white masters, and their active participation in subduing Turner's insurrection. In Styron's novel, the rebels encounter the resistance of armed black servants who do not hesitate to open fire against them. Thelwell questions the probability of such an event, and argues that no level-headed slave owner would have equipped his chattel with guns in those circumstances, simply being afraid that they would join the rebels. Eugene D. Genovese tries to discredit that argument, reminding Thelwell that according to what Turner says in his confession to Gray, he was discovered in his hole in the ground in the forest by two black men, who immediately informed their master about his hideaway. Genovese – a scholar specializing in African American history – finds the novel "historically sound," and although he admits that "Styron takes liberties with fact, as every novelist does," he remains of the opinion that at the same time the novelist "does

not do violence to the historical record,” which “cannot be said for his critics” (Genovese 1982: 202-203).

Genovese maintains that “[i]t is pardonable for Styron to take liberties with the particular history of the Nat Turner revolt, so long as he does no violence to the history of the slave revolts generally. Here ... he has proved himself a better student of history than his critics” (Genovese 1982: 204). The historian points at another issue where they allegedly miss the truth, choosing as an example Thelwell’s criticism that Styron gives too lenient a picture of slavery in Virginia at that time in his novel. Thelwell criticizes Styron for “only fleetingly mention[ing]” in his novel the fact that during the economic crisis of the 1830’s, which resulted from “Virginia land being increasingly exhausted” by intensive tobacco cultivation, even so-called “enlightened” planters (i.e. those for whom slavery had ceased to be just a “financial operation” and became an “exercise in moral obligation”) turned to “breeding black men and women like animals for the purpose of supplying the labor markets of the Deep South” (Thelwell 1982: 192)².

Genovese argues that Thelwell, as he puts it, “criticizes Styron for *denying* that Virginia masters deliberately bred slaves, and refers to the incontrovertible evidence of huge slave sales to the lower South” (italics mine) out of ignorance: “had [the black critic] read the historical literature carefully,” he would understand the difference between “a system of deliberate breeding” and “the process of transferring surplus population” (Genovese 1982: 203); and, according to the historian, it is the latter that explains the dramatic statistical increase of slaves sold from Virginia to other Southern states at that period.

More recent scholarly publications, however, do not support Genovese’s arguments. For example in her 2001 article titled “Un/Re/Dis Covering Slave Breeding in Thirteenth Amendment Jurisprudence” Pamela D. Bridgewater (2001: 22) refers to Virginia as “a leading slave breeding state.” Moreover, this fact is not denied in Styron’s novel (and Thelwell knows it well; by saying that it is “only fleetingly mentioned,” he only implies that it is not given enough importance) – as testified by the bitter words spoken by Judge Cobb:

Now ... all we can raise is horses! ... Horses and what else, *what else?* Horses and pickaninnies!
Pickaninnies! Little black infants by the score, the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands!
 The fairest state of them all, this tranquil and beloved domain – what has it now become? A *nursery*
 for Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas. A monstrous breeding farm to supply the sinew to gratify the maw
 of Eli Whitney’s infernal machine... (Styron 1967: 69)

Styron is also strongly criticised by Thelwell and other black critics for his representation of “The Freed Slave,” who is shown as a man lost, confused, starving, frequently drunk, entirely dependent on others, and incapable of functioning in society; in short: ill-adapted to freedom and taking responsibility for himself. In Styron’s novel, the drunken freeman called Arnold is commented

² In this article I use the extended version of Thelwell’s text, and not the abridged version from the collection *William Styron’s Nat Turner. Ten Black Writers Respond*.

on by Turner as “[u]nschooled, unskilled, clumsy by nature, childlike and credulous,” and as a result “more insignificant and wretched than he had ever been in slavery” (Styron 1967: 261). The black critics argue that such an image of “The Freed Slave” is seriously misleading since black freemen, who were present in every southern community, “worked as skilled artisans ... ; some, to their discredit, even owned slaves” (meaning that despite being immoral they were successful), and generally “represented a constant inspiration” for the slaves (Thelwell 1982: 191).

Nonetheless, Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III, who have carefully read Styron’s annotations on his copy of Drewry’s dissertation and implement the method of comparative analysis, provide evidence that in the process of working on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* the novelist used one more important source: *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, a travel book by Frederick Law Olmstead, in which black freemen are described as “a miserable set of vagabonds, drunken, vicious, worse off ... than those who are retained in slavery” (Olmstead quoted after Casciato and West III 1982: 223). The critics demonstrate that “Styron was by no means careless about his use of historical fact, as many of his detractors have maintained” (Casciato and West III 1982: 213), but simultaneously they argue that whereas “in the more narrow and exacting sense, Styron was quite faithful to the historical record,” he “may still be guilty of distorting ‘history’ in the larger sense” (Casciato and West III 1982: 223), a conclusion contrary to Genovese’s claim, mentioned earlier. Casciato and West III assume that such distortions result from Styron’s entering “imaginatively into the mind of a nineteenth-century black rebel” (Casciato and West III 1982: 223), about whom there is very little factual knowledge, and who is utterly different from a white writer from the South in terms of racial experiences.

There is no point in exhaustive discussion of the controversies pertaining to Styron’s representation of the historical Nat Turner. However, it is worth sketching them. Black critics reproach the novelist for sullyng the memory of their hero, for instance by ascribing to him antipathy or even contempt for his fellow slaves (the novel contains a great number of extracts when Turner looks at other blacks with loathing and disgust) and equipping him with sexual “weaknesses” such as a homosexual episode in his early youth and his suppressed desire for a young white woman – the one he eventually kills (both are products of the author’s imagination). In contrast to Styron’s protagonist, as Lerone Bennett (1968) *wants to believe* – since the available historical sources do not reveal much about Turner’s personal qualities – Turner was courageous, commanding, as well as virile, and demonstrated solidarity with his black brothers. It is worth a slight digression to note that such idealization of a black rebel-hero brings to mind the unrealistically positive images of black radicals in nineteenth-century novels with a purpose, for instance Madison Washington in Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* (1853) or Henry in Martin R. Delany’s novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859).

If it is entirely impossible to decide in those cases to what extent, or whether at all, Styron misses the truth, as we do not have enough historical data in this respect (hence the problem can be reduced to the question what sort of Nat Turner black critics would like to see), in several important and perfectly clear issues the novelist departs from the “*known facts*” in a surprising way.

For instance: “The Confessions of Nat Turner” transcribed by Gray (1831) reveals among other things that Turner was brought up in a complete family, that he was encouraged to learn reading by his parents who had shown him his first book to keep him from crying, that Christianity was instilled in him by his grandmother to whom he was strongly attached, and that his intelligence was used by his peers in planning their stealing (and stealing was one of slaves’ strategy of resistance). In Styron’s novel, Turner is brought up by his mother, born in America soon after his grandmother had crossed the Atlantic on a slaver, and his mother goes insane and dies. He has no knowledge about his actual father, and his white master becomes a father figure. When his master discovers that little Nat has stolen a book and tried to learn reading by himself, he orders his daughter to provide the boy with an elementary education that also included religious matters, which even further alienates Nat from the community of slaves and strengthens his identification with the “superior” white culture.

George Core (1981: 218) maintains that “in a fictive sense and in the larger historical perspective it makes little or no difference who taught the actual Nat how to read, or whether ... his father ran away.” Genovese (1982: 206) must be of the same opinion since he asks rhetorically: “How much can we make of Turner’s having been taught to read by his parents? Who, after all, probably taught them? ... Styron did not invent white paternalism.” Does this mean, however, that both white paternalism and the negative image of the black family must be sustained, especially in a case where the writer had opposite data at his disposal? Are we supposed to disregard the validity of a black critic’s comment: “The primary source of information, of ‘known facts,’ is extremely brief, about 4,000 words. Why was it necessary, in this objective reconstruction, to depart from this source?” (Thelwell 1982: 189-190). What is more, Styron did this soon after publication of the Moynihan Report (1965), which placed responsibility for the social disintegration of the African American community and a series of riots in black ghettos in the 1960s on the dilapidation of the nuclear family among blacks in the United States, replacing it with a matriarchal model.

Perhaps black critics-polemicists, driven by the ideological necessities of the historical moment, are wrong when they repeat endlessly that as a rule no white writer is capable of rendering convincingly a black character due to the lack of similar experiences and the language barrier. However, we should not be surprised that they make such claims when their opinion is juxtaposed with a peculiar comment by Core, who sums up the issue in the following manner:

The author invests Nat with a sensibility and intelligence and range of knowledge which are doubtless greater than he in fact possessed as historical personage, but this is possible because so little is known of the actual Nat Turner. (Core 1981: 215)

It seems that the controversies and polemics about William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* resulted not only from an entirely different understanding by white and black critics and scholars of the question as to what literature is essentially and what social role it has to perform, but also from the incompatible implementation of historiography, in the realm of which both sides, consciously or not, place the novel. In his introduction to *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black*

Writers Respond, John Henrik Clarke (1968: vii) quotes the Marxist critic Herbert Aptheker whose words are used as an epigraph for the book: “History’s potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalization, and legitimacy.” Genovese (1982: 202) calls this sort of thinking “nonsense” which “sets the tone for the book,” claiming that the purpose of historiography is always the truth.

Apparently, he does so too hastily: Hayden White, writing about the narrativisation of history, points out that it is characteristic of Marxist historians to perceive it, as Frederick Jameson does, as “a past from which one would wish to have descended” (White 1987: 149). Such a “genealogical” understanding of history, as contrasted with a “genetic” one that is concerned solely with the “past from which one actually had descended,” serves the purpose of making it possible for desired projects to be “realized by living human agents in their future” (White 1987: 149). Nonetheless, in the American socio-political reality that understanding was and still is – as proven by Baraka’s case – pre-determined to a large extent by the dividing line of color that frequently overlaps with ideological differences which prove exceedingly difficult to overcome.

References

- Bennett, Lerone. 1968. Nat’s Last White Man. In: John Henrick Clarke (ed.), *William Styron’s Nat Turner. Ten Black Writers Respond*. Boston: Beacon Press, 3-16.
- Bridgewater, Pamela D. 2001. Un/Re/Dis Covering Slave Breeding in Thirteenth Amendment Jurisprudence. *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 1. 11-43.
- Casciato, Arthur D. and James L. W. West III. 1982. *William Styron and The Southampton Insurrection*. In: Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III (eds.), *Critical Essays on William Styron*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 213-225.
- Clarke, John Henrik. 1968. Introduction. In: John Henrik Clarke (ed.), *William Styron’s Nat Turner. Ten Black Writers Respond*. Beacon Press: Boston. vii – xii.
- Core, George. 1981. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Burden of the Past*. In: Robert K. Morris, and Irving Malin (eds.), *The Achievement of William Styron*. The University of Georgia Press. Athens, Georgia,. 206-222.
- Genovese, Eugene D. 1982. *William Styron before the People’s Court*. In: Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III (eds.), *Critical Essays on William Styron*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 201-212.
- Gray, Thomas R. 1831. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection at Southampton, VA (1831)*.
- <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=etas> (28 October 2014).
- Gwiazda, Piotr. 2004. The Aesthetics of Politics/ The Politics of Aesthetics: Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America”. *Contemporary Literature*.3. 460-485.
- Kamionowski, Jerzy. 2011. “Who Do the Saying” – (Mis)Reading America in Toni Morrison’s “The Dead of September 11” and Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America.” In: Jerzy Durczak and Paweł Frelik (eds.), *(Mis)Reading America: American Dreams, Fictions and Illusions*. Kraków: Universitas. 195-213.

- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1967 (1965). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In: Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (eds.), *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. The M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. 1/47 – 78/124.
- Styron, William. 1967. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. New York: Random House.
- Styron, William. 1982. Acceptance Speech for the Howells Medal. In: Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III (eds.), *Critical Essays on William Styron*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 226-227.
- Thelwell, Michael. 1982. Mr. William Styron and The Reverend Turner.. In: Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III (eds.), *Critical Essays on William Styron*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. 184-200.
- Thompson, John. 1982. *Rise and Slay!* In: Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III (eds.), *Critical Essays on William Styron*. G.K. Hall & Co. Boston. 162-172.
- Werner, Craig. 1986. New Democratic Vistas. In: Joe Weixlmann and Chester J. Fontenot (eds.), *Belief vs. Theory in Black American Literary Criticism*. Greenwood, Florida: The Penkevill Publishing Company. 47-84.
- White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press.

Grzegorz Moroz

University of Białystok

Oxford Travel Book Writers and Gentlemen-Scholars: Constructing Narrative Personae in Aldous Huxley's *The Jestings Pilate*, Robert Byron's *The Station* and Evelyn Waugh's *Remote People*

Abstract. The travel book as a genre in the British literary tradition has been, for more than two centuries, characterized by the central role of craftily constructed narrative personae of gentlemen/travellers. This paper is an attempt to pinpoint the main similarities and differences in the construction of the narrative personae of three key between-the-wars Oxford graduates, who later became renowned writers Robert Byron, Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh.

Keywords: narrative persona, Oxford, novelist, travel book, construction, travel writing.

Travel book writers and travellers

Paul Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* was published in 1980, two years after Edward Said's *Orientalism*. These two books, so different in scope and critical approaches—the former one was a swan song of liberal humanism, the latter paved the way for the new way of reading literature usually referred to as the post-colonial—were central in establishing and putting on a firmer ground the inter-disciplinary field of travel writing studies. One of the key tenets of Fussell's *Abroad*—later fiercely criticized by the majority of critics—was that the distinction between a traveller and a tourist is a real one rather than a construct created to uphold and sustain class distinctions. In fact, in Fussell's taxonomy apart from a tourist, usually a working class person, aware that she is a tourist and not ashamed of it, there exists a category of an anti-tourist, usually a middle class person aware that she is a tourist, ashamed of it, and therefore adopting a set of

anti-tourists strategies because she “has read and heard just enough to sense that being a tourist is somehow offensive and scorned by an imagined upper class which it hopes to emulate, and, if possible, be mistaken for” (Fussell 1980: 49). And there is a traveller, usually an upper middle class person, differentiated from an anti-tourist by the fact that her/his motive is inquiry and not “self-protection and vanity” (Fussell 1980: 47).

Following Jonathan Culler’s ground-breaking article “The Semiotics of Tourism” most contemporary researchers would probably agree that Fussell’s category of a traveller should in fact be included in the category of an anti-tourist, as an “anti-anti-tourist”. An upper middle class travelling person (considering herself a traveller) distances herself not only from (working class) tourists, but also from (middle class) anti-tourists. From an anti-anti-tourist’s perspective: anti-tourists are there to emulate her, and be mistaken for her, while she is out there not to emulate anyone, but because she believes that she is there for the superior motive of an inquiry.

However, this distinct group, regardless if we insist on calling them “travellers” or “anti-anti-tourists”, remains a simple and useful analytical tool in tackling the issues connected with Oxford between-the-wars graduates who turned to travel writing. Fussell nostalgically claimed that the between-the-wars period was the “final age of travel” (Fussell 1980: vii) in which there still existed “real travellers” – young, mostly Oxbridge educated literary men, who travelled “when the going was good” (Waugh 1951) to quote a title Evelyn Waugh (a Merton man) gave to his 1945 book containing fragments from his 1930’s travel books. They travelled often in order to write travel books for which publishers paid “handsome fees” (Auden and MacNeice 1937: 11) to use a quote from W.H. Auden (a Christ Church man) poem/letter to Lord Gordon Byron opening his and Louise MacNeice’s *Letters from Iceland* (1937).

According to Fussell in that period “Cambridge can boast a few devotees of abroad, mostly homosexuals like Forster, Ackerley and Isherwood, but it is Oxford that produced the bulk of between-the-wars literary travelers” (Fussell 1980: 76). Fussell divided them according to the colleges they went to:

Balliol was responsible for [Graham] Greene, Patrick Balfour, Aldous Huxley, Peter Quennell and [Cyril] Connolly [...], Magdalen produced Alan Pryce-Jones, Christ Church David Talbot Rice, [Christopher] Sykes, [Peter] Fleming and [W.H.] Auden, Hertford, Evelyn Waugh, and Merton, Robert Byron. (Fussell 1980: 76)

Fussell observed that “merged into a single type, these people project an image of a character ‘the age demanded’” (Fussell 1980: 76-7). He located Peter Fleming and Robert Byron at two extremes of a spectrum of Oxford travel writers and their narrative personae’s construction:

If Byron’s character has the effect of making the reader proud of British resoluteness—*stubbornness* might be a better word—Fleming’s make the reader proud of British decency, a refreshing contrast to all those young “artistic” young people like Brian Howard. One thing happening in these travel books is a re-definition of a the British “young person”: projecting, implicitly, various models of the post-war young man. [...] Conscious of the Britishness of the characters they display, both Fleming and Byron are careful in their travel books to remind the reader of their origin in a particular British intellectual and emotional tradition. (Fussell 1980:77)

Fussell's statement remains valid not only for Robert Byron and Peter Fleming, but also for other Oxford graduates who turned to travel books: Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Peter Quennell or Patrick Balfour; all of whom were careful to construct their persona in such ways as to remind the reader of their origin in a particular British intellectual and emotional tradition of upper middle class gentlemen.

Fussell's *Abroad* for all its literary and critical merits lacks the historical perspective in the development of the travel book as a genre in the British literary tradition. Fussell did not go further back in time than the travel books of Norman Douglas, written at the turn of the centuries. Whereas the genre of the travel book in this modern form was established in the middle of the eighteenth century with the travel books of Henry Fielding *A Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1754) and Tobias Smollett *Travels through France and Italy* (1766). Crucial in this development was the so called "sentimental" (as opposed to "scientific") mode of writing, foregrounding the "subjectivity" and idiosyncrasies of a narrative persona at the expense of the "objectivity" of the report. In fact, the beginnings of the sentimental mode of travel book writing could be traced back to Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discoverie of Guyana* (1596) and Thomas Coryat's *Crudities* (1611).

As I argue in *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen* (2013), the genre of the travel book in the British literary tradition since Fielding and Smollett has been developing alongside the genres of the novel and the autobiography in the symbiosis of synergy and friction. One of the genre's two most distinctive features is that travel book writers (often novelists themselves) have been concerned to cast upon their predominantly non-fictional accounts the aura, of what Gérald Genette (1993: viii) calls "literariness by diction", and what Fielding (1987: 161) in his *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* referred to as "some few embellishments" in the manner "of all kind of ornament of stile and diction". The second crucial feature of a travel book as a genre, even more important from the perspective of this essay, is that a male narrative persona, located centrally in the structure of a narrative has been constructed predominantly within the paradigms of an English (British) gentleman.

This convergence of a highly crafted, elaborate style of a narrative (often hidden behind the facade of a simple diary/journal form) with carefully constructed narrative persona of an (eccentric) gentleman was developed in the Victorian period in such travel books as Alexander William Kinglake's *Eöthen* (1844) and Charles M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888). The process was to reach its peak in Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* (1937). The construction of a gentleman's narrative persona in British travel books could be analyzed from different perspectives and at many levels. Taking into account the length limitations of this essay I have decided to restrict my analysis to just one aspect of gentlemen: namely of gentlemen as (amateur) scholars. I will argue that this aspect of the construction of the narrative personae could be seen as an important element in the writing of "good" travel books in the British literary tradition.

"Good" travel books

The concept of distinguishing between "good" travel books from the "ordinary" ones, mostly through the literary merits of the former, was made popular by Paul Fussell in his *Abroad*, where

in order to support this distinction he quoted from Norman Douglas, without however giving the source or the context in which Douglas wrote. Douglas was a prolific travel book writer himself, with a strong intellectual and anti-modernist bias and his books – like *Siren Land* (1911) or *Old Calabria* (1915) – were widely read by the next generation of travel book writers; which is the generation I am concerned with in this essay – of writers who graduated from Oxford during and after the Great War. In 1925 Douglas published *Experiments*, a book of literary essays and impressionistic short stories. It contained a review of the abridged 1908 edition of the one of the most original and eccentric British travel books of the late Victorian period Charles M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*. Douglas considered Doughty to be one of the few travel book writers who managed to oppose the tide of Modernism and preserved the key Anglo-Saxon qualities and strengths. Douglas's definition of a "good travel book" uses explicitly Doughty's book as an example, and implicitly Douglas's own books:

It seems to me that a reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to the exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental voyage which takes place side by side with the outer one, one that the ideal book of this kind offers us, indeed, a triple opportunity of exploration – abroad, into the author's brain and into our own. The writer should therefore possess a brain worth exploring, some philosophy of life – not necessarily, though by preference of his own forging – and the courage to proclaim it and put it to the test, he must be naïf and profound, both child and sage. (Douglas 1925: 5)

Douglas believed that an ideal writer of a travel book should approximate a figure of a prototypical Anglo-Saxon gentleman-scholar. He listed the features which he considered essential for such gentlemen-scholars: the ability to "see things from their own individual angle", "[t]heir leisurely aristocratic flavour, their wholesome discussions about this or that, their waywardness and all that mercurial touch of a bygone generation" (Douglas 1925: 6).

Most of the Oxford graduated travel books writers of the between the wars period – even though they may have not read Douglas's review – in constructing their narrative personae used the elements of a figure of a gentleman-scholar. In order to test this claim, I have selected three travel books written by three Oxford graduates in the late nineteen twenties and early nineteen thirties: Aldous Huxley's *Jesting Pilate* (1926), Robert Byron's *The Station* (1928) and Evelyn Waugh's *Remote People* (1931).

Huxley's intellectual holiday

Jesting Pilate is a collection of essays from Huxley's round the globe tour undertaken in 1925-1926. In this travel book the persona constructed is that of an detached intellectual and a Pyrrhonic sceptic. The ideas in this book are more important than people and Huxley suggests this in the title itself *Jesting Pilate: An Intellectual Holiday*. The phrase "jesting Pilate" is traditionally used as a description of the passage from the Gospel of St. John (18:37, 18:38) in which Pontius Pilate answers Jesus's claim that he is a the witness of the truth with "Truth? What is truth?" and

pronounces Jesus innocent. Both parts of the title open up the possibilities of introducing and discussing serious ideas, but at the same time of mocking, jesting and deriding them in a sceptical fashion. The notion of being witness to the truth is “jested” by Pilate in the first part, whereas the seriousness of the “intellectual pursuit” of ideas is checked by the very “anti-intellectual” overtones of the word “holiday”. Huxley’s persona from *Jesting Pilate* displays features of a gentleman scholar in two diverse fields: as a Pyrrhonic sceptic, suspicious of irrationality of any forms of spirituality and as a *connoisseur* of arts. The key intellectual problem for Huxley’s persona in the Indian part of the journey was the spirituality of this country. The persona’s discussion of spirituality is performed in terms of tropes that have been identified by postcolonial critics. On the one hand we have filth, dirt and defilement, on the other India is presented as belonging to the earlier, childish stage in the progress of civilization. When on a train “some Hindu pope of considerable holiness” breaks the solitude the Huxleys enjoy in the second class compartment, after the persona has expressed his doubts and ironic lack of certainty about the man’s holiness, he declares: “All that we could be certain of was that he looked unpleasant and was undoubtedly dirty: also that his admirers exhaled the sour stink of garments long unwashed” (Huxley 2000: 430). The whole meeting with the Hindu saint is presented with detachment, irony and even sarcasm from the very first phrase “some Hindu pope of considerable holiness”, through the description of his behaviour on the train:

He, meanwhile, passed the time by counting his money, which was contained in a large brass-bound box, by loudly eating, and, later, dozing. Even at the stations he did not take the trouble to rouse himself, but reclined with closed eyes along his seat, and passively permitted the faithful to kiss his feet. When one is holy, as he evidently was, it is unnecessary to keep up appearances, behave decently or do anything for one’s followers. (Huxley 2000: 430-1)

The episode with the stinking saint is used by Huxley to present his persona’s views on religion and spirituality in a jocular context, but also to show his erudite skills as an intellectual (amateur gentleman-scholar) capable of generalizing on the role of religions in the process of social development of different civilizations. First, he pokes fun on Lev Tolstoy and his objections that too much cleanliness is a badge of class. “Work is prayer. Work is also stink. Therefore stink is prayer. So, more or less, argues Tolstoy, who goes on to condemn the rich for not stinking ... Tolstoy’s remedy is that we should all stink together” (Huxley 2000: 431-2). Huxley’s persona explains how the incident with his travelling companion made him, but only for a moment, “a thorough-going Voltairian” (Huxley 2000: 432). Huxley’s essay ends with a detached assessment of pros and cons of religions in the life of societies, seen from the evolutionary perspective of an amateur anthropologist and social historian:

Any force that tends to the strengthening of society is ... of the highest biological importance. Religion is obviously such a force. All religions have been unanimous in encouraging within limits that have tended to grow wider and ever wider, the social, altruistic, humanitarian proclivities of man, and in condemning his anti-social, self-assertive tendencies. Those who like to speak anthropomorphically would be justified

in saying that religion is a device employed by the Life Force for the promotion of its evolutionary designs. But they would be justified in adding that religion is also a device employed by the Devil for the dissemination of idiocy, intolerance, and servile abjection. (Huxley 2000: 433)

In *Jesting Pilate* India was for Huxley the past with religion as the force slowing down the process of development and civilization. His distaste for Indian spirituality was so strong that in the essay from the trip across the Pacific, the persona confesses that after reading Henry Ford's biography *My Life and Work* found in the ship's library he realized that: "in these seas and to one fresh from India and Indian 'spirituality', Indian dirt and religion, Ford seems a greater man than Buddha" (Huxley 2000: 521). This statement must sound weirdly and paradoxically to anyone remembering that in his best-selling novel *Brave New World*, (published six year later) the dystopian world presented there is set in the year 632 A.F., where A.F. is an abbreviation of "After Ford", the new mechanical era inaugurated in the year Henry Ford launched the first automatic car assembly line. The process of perceiving America as a possibility of a more optimistic future was to stop quite abruptly after the Huxleys landed in the California of the Jazz Age and he started to reconsider his views on Buddhism and Fordism. The shift of perceiving Ford as a greater man than Buddha to perceiving him as the "spiritual" leader of technocratic and dehumanized brave New World could be seen as a part of the greater shift which Aldous Huxley underwent between 1926 – when he was reading Ford's biography on board of a ship bound for California – and 1937, when he went to America once again; this time to give a lecture tour on pacifism, supported by "spiritually" based notion of the Nobler Hypothesis. What remains crucial from the perspective of Huxley's narrative personae is that regardless of the fact if he was supporting Fordism or Buddhism, or was merely extremely sceptical to both these philosophies, Huxley remained to construct his personae as intellectuals, keen to present his interpretative skills in a wide array of disciplines in which they might have been considered as amateur scholars.

One such distinct discipline in *Jesting Pilate* is that of art criticism. Huxley was an art *connoisseur*, and writing about art was important for him throughout his long career as a man of letters: he worked as a dramatic and literary critic and reviewer for such periodicals as the *Athenaeum* and the *Westminster Gazette* at the career's beginning at the turn of nineteen tens and twentieth. When he died on 22 November 1963, he was in the process of writing an essay entitled "Shakespeare and Religion". But, whereas in the field of literature Huxley may be considered a "professional" rather than an "amateur", he remained an (enthusiastic) amateur in the field of visual arts. The reasons for the Huxleys settling down in Italy at the beginning of nineteen twentieth were generally threefold: *cambio* (the exchange rate in this period favoured pound startling and meant that one could afford to live comfortably in Italy on the income which in Britain guaranteed very austere existence) the Italian climate and – last but not least – Italian art treasures. Huxley's first travel book *Along the Road* (1925), recounting trips from the early "Italian" period in his life is just as much an art book as it is a travel book. The two central parts of the book – Part II entitled "Places" and Part III "Works of Art" – consist much more of "art essays" than of "travel essays". Huxley's persona in *Along the Road* is that of

a belated Grand Tourist; eager to immerse himself in the great tradition of visual Arts, at the moment when the Grand Tour project was already spent. While embarking on a round the world trip, which resulted in *Jesting Pilate*, Huxley took with himself art *connoisseurship* he had accumulated during the four years of living on the outskirts of Florence, visiting its galleries and travelling extensively in Italy to Rome and other centres of Art. He used this *connoisseurship* relatively sparingly and in the manner which today might be considered almost as a model of Eurocentric discourse on non-European arts. Thus, while commenting on the Golden Temple of the Sikhs, the narrative persona wryly combines his intellectual bias against Indian spirituality with his aesthetic bias against non-European art. The Golden Temple “is genuinely eighteen-carat. It is also exceedingly sacred. Holiness and costliness make up for any lack of architecture” (Huxley 2000: 437). The only praise, although quite lukewarm, of the Indian art, which Huxley’s persona displays is when he describes some water-colours from the Mogul period in the Lahore Museum as “amusing” (Huxley 2000: 433).

Byzantine station of Robert Byron

The Station: Athos: Treasures and Men by Robert Byron is a description of a tour of the monasteries at the Holy Mountain of Athos Byron undertook together with his three Oxford friends: David Talbot Rice, Mark Oglivie-Grant and Gerald Reitlinger in the summer of 1927. *The Station*, in a standard travel book fashion, combines the descriptions of the routines of the journey (with its hardships, described in travel *as travail* fashion: vermin, dirt, dishonest muleteers and pleasures: leisurely swims in the Aegean, tasting exquisite ouzo or oranges), with the scholarly passages on the history, present politics and art of Athos, the Holy Mountain. Christopher Sykes, an Oxford friend and a fellow-traveller to Oxiana remarked that Robert Byron in “his extravagantly one-sided books on Byzantine art and civilization [...] was what the French call a ‘vulgarisateur’, and it is a pity that we have in English no equivalent word to indicate so important a function” (Sykes 2000: 15). It seems, however, that in *The Station*, the only of three Byzantine Byron’s books which has a format of a travel book (the other two *The Byzantine Achievement* and *The Dawn of the Western Painting* are books on Byzantine history and art narrated in the third person), Byron was more than a vulgarisateur’, thanks to the construction of the narration and his narrative persona.

The Station opens with an epigrammatic paratext which is also an intertext, taken from Cristoforo Buondelmonti’s *Traveller in the East* (1420)

Here, in lush valleys, teem bees, figs and olives. The inmates of the monasteries weave cloth, stitch shoes and make nets. One turns the spindle of a hand-loom through the wool, another twists a basket of twigs. From time to time, at stated hours, all essay to praise God. And peace reigns among them, always and for ever. (Byron 2000: 5)

Byron carefully preserved this mood, pastoral, religious and mystical of Buondelmonti’s passage, in the whole of his narrative thanks to crucial interventions of his narrative persona interspersed throughout the book.

The first view of the Holy Mountain, seen from the sea at dawn is described in the picturesque manner:

Over a last bottle of beer we said good-bye to this last tossing straw of our world. We slept. Till, when barely light, there appeared, framed in cold circle of the porthole, the dark outline of a long finger of land, twisted by imperceptible darker shadows into deep ravines and curving bays. At its end, cut in terraced silhouette against the frigid gleams of the lower sky, reared a vast steeple from the livid grey sea. As the sun, risen a fiery ball above the rim of the world, warmed the cold light, silhouette gave place to hazy pink. Here and there twinkled the white blur of a monastery down at the water's edge or perched up among the woods, The Holy Mountain! And ourselves the pilgrims. (Byron 2000: 46-7)

The book ends with a farewell with of Athos, seen again from a ship: "There, carried high on a bank of clouds, hovers a shape, a triangle in the sky. This is the Holy Mountain Athos, station of faith where all the years have stopped" (Byron 2000: 256).

In between Byron's persona on numerous occasions presents the uniqueness of Athos in Europe's spiritual history. At one moment he calls the Holy Mountain "an organism in which the germs of life are as vigorous as when first implanted". (Byron 2000: 66). He is often very critical of Western Christianity, in both Roman Catholic and Protestant versions and apologetic of the Orthodox Church, with the Holy Mountain of Athos as its pinnacle, the representative of "true" Christianity

[...] not yet moulded by Latin materialism to the convenience of an institution; not wrung by civil wars, combed with the borrowings of sectarians, and balanced between the parties of the state like a boulder on a needle; but a single path of exploration, unclouded by doubtful ethics and hieratic blackmail, toward the eternal El Dorado, Such was the Christianity that conquers, and such, on the Holy Mountain, it has remained. (Byron 2000: 66)

Robert Byron never became converted to the Orthodox church; his fascination with it remained thoroughly intellectual and aesthetic. Yet, the Byzantine bias of his arguments allowed him on the one hand to strengthen his anti-Modernist critique of the West in general and Britain in particular. Moreover, it allowed him to construct his persona as an amateur – but highly competent – scholar of Byzantine religion and art.

Evelyn Waugh – a Roman Catholic squire

Evelyn Waugh, Robert Byron's friend from Oxford "found Byron's Byzantinism bogus, just a fad" (*Abroad*, 83) After Waugh decided to be received into the Roman Catholic Church in autumn 1930, Byron quarrelled with Waugh, because he conceived it as an act hostile to his own Byzantinism (Fussell 1980: 83). Waugh's decision had important consequences for how he was to construct the narrative personae of his subsequent travel books. Whereas in Waugh's *Labels* (1930), written before his conversion, the narrative persona is that of a *camp* dandy, *Remote People* (1931), his first travel book written after the conversion, relies on a persona of a young Catholic conservative. The persona's Catholicism in *Remote People* is not so central and overriding as Byron's persona's Byzantinism in

The Station, largely due to the fact that Waugh, unlike Byron, was not travelling to the holy, spiritual centre place of a religion. Nevertheless, Waugh in *Remote People* used Catholicism rhetorically to create a binary opposition between the barbarity of Africa and its religions in general and the Roman Catholicism as the mainstay of civilization and light. For example, while describing the coronation mass of Heille Sallasie in Addis Abeba, conducted in Coptic ritual, so obscure, that even his fellow-traveller, an American Prof. W, an expert on Coptic religion can't distinguish of offertory from consecration and secret Gospel, the persona seizes it as a chance to promote his views clearly:

I suddenly saw the classic basilica and open altar as a great positive achievement, a triumph of light over darkness consciously accomplished, and I saw theology as the science of simplifications by which nebulous and elusive ideas are formalised and made intelligible and exact...

And I began to see how these obscure sanctuaries had grown, with the clarity of the Western reason into the great open altars of Catholic Europe, where Mass is said in a flood of light, high in the sight of all. (Waugh 2003: 248-9)

The contrast of Roman Catholicism in Africa as the island of sanity and order surrounded by “rank barbarity” is also foregrounded in the description of the Catholic convent at Kokonjiro in Uganda, which is described as:

[...] the little island of order and sweetness in an ocean of rank barbarity; all around it for hundreds of miles lies gross jungle, bush and forest, haunted by devils and fear of darkness, where human life merges into the cruel, automatic life of the animals, here they were singing the offices just as they had been sung in Europe when the missions were little radiant points of learning and decency in a pagan wilderness. (Waugh 2003: 334)

Such declarations, although rare, are nevertheless crucial, for they underscore the persona's aloofness from the anxieties of Modernity and give him his individual, unique perspective for describing and commenting upon other cultures. In *Remote People* Waugh's construction of the narrative persona as a critique of Modernism apart from upholding the traditional Christian (and therefore pre-Reformation, Roman Catholic) views and values relies on his strong support of the group of British settlers and farmers living then in the so called Happy Valley. Waugh intertextually, through the connection with Anthony Trollope's *Barsetshire* chronicles, fiercely defends the rights of the settlers to take land from its original African owners and live in what he called “*Barsetshire on the Equator*” (Waugh 2003: 324). These settlers are shown to be like archetypical British squires: leading, quiet, happy rustic life in pastoral scenery, exiles from England, when England no longer allowed them to live the lives they had been accustomed to for centuries. Waugh's persona, through an extensive apology defence of the settlers/squires ideology, and lifestyle against left-wing critics, assumes an aura of a conservative longing for unorthodoxy and the nostalgic return to the supposedly universal values of the hierarchies imposed by the Roman Catholic Church, before the Reformation came and spoilt it all. And this offered him a unique position to look down on what he perceived as barbarities of two kinds: the barbarity of African cultures and religions, and

the barbarity of the New Age at home. He implicitly declared his persona to be “Quixotic” and therefore eccentric in being faithful to the traditional values and hostile to the changes initiated by the Reformation.

Conclusions

These three distinct constructions of narrative personae, Huxley’s in *Jesting Pilate*, Byron’s in *The Station* and Waugh’s in *Remote People*, for all the differences have a quite a few characteristic features in common; features which they also share with the majority of travel books written by Oxbridge men in the between-the-wars period. Firstly, these intellectual and spiritual passions of the narrative personae, for Pyrrhonic scepticism, Western art, Byzantinism and Roman Catholicism, fall within the range of a British gentleman’s singularity and his pursuit of being perceived as an (amateur) scholar. Secondly, these passions offered vantage points to criticize the Modern project, with its mechanisation, uniformity and dehumanisation. And also to locate the Golden Age in the past: for Huxley’s persona in a well stocked Enlightenment library, for Byron’s persona in the pre-Turkish Byzantium, in Waugh’s case in the Catholic, pre-Reformation Europe. Thirdly, these passions, connected with expertise and connoisseurship, allowed these personae to be constructed as travellers, rather than tourists, driven by genuine individual inquiry and not the horde spirit of tourists or class obsessions of anti-tourist. And, last but not least, such constructions offered something, which in the marketing jargon is called “unique selling points”, elements that distinguished them and gave advantages over other writers in the lucrative, but also highly competitive market of travel books in the inter-war Britain.

References

- Auden, W.H. and Louise McNeice 1937. *Letters from Iceland*. London. Faber & Faber.
- Byron, Robert 2000. *The Station; Athos, Treasures and Men*. London. Phoenix Press.
- Genette, Gérard 1993 *Fiction and Diction*. Ithaca/London. Cornell University Press.
- Culler, Jonathan 1988. The Semiotics of Tourism. In *Framing the Sign; Criticism and its Institutions*. 153-167. Oxford. Basil Blackwell.
- Douglas, Norman 1925. *Experiments*. London. Chapman and Hall.
- Fussell, Paul 1980. *Abroad; British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Huxley, Aldous 2000. *Complete Essays of Aldous Huxley, vol. II. 1926-1929*. R.S. Baker and James Sexton (eds). Chicago, Ivan R. Dee.
- Moroz, Grzegorz 2013. *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen; Constructing Male Narrative Personae in British Travel Books, from the Beginnings to the Second World War*. Frankfurt am Main. Peter Lang Verlag.
- Sykes, Christopher 2000. Introduction. In Robert Byron *The Station; Athos, Treasures and Men*. 11-17. London. Phoenix Press.
- Waugh, Evelyn 2003. *Waugh Abroad; Collected Travel Writing*. New York. Everyman’s Library.

Stephen Oladele Solanke

Elizade University, Nigeria

Mythotypes and Sociological Imports in the Apartheid World of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

Abstract. Oppression of man by man has been a common phenomenon from time immemorial. This subjugation has mostly been subtle, insidious and debilitating, especially of the oppressed and the common people. This paper examines the apartheid South African world in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and exposes tacit, discreet but mythically destructive avenues that Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani opine oppressors have always archetypically drawn from. The paper allows that freedom is possible if the oppressed are introspective, creative, focussed, and do not get themselves lost in the ‘dangerous dreams’ of their oppressors. They must, like Styles, Sizwe and Buntu in the examined text, be able to create, archetypically too, like their oppressors, new songs, new myths and new weaponry and strategies to unchain themselves.

Keywords: South Africa, Athol Fugard, apartheid, mythic, archetypal, freedom, oppression.

Introduction

Across civilizations and times, people have always suffered under the oppression of others. This has been facilitated by various factors, e.g. economics, pacts, treaties, and wars. There are other covert factors that have negatively impacted and deepened this unwholesome activity in the guises of race, ethnicity and religion. The religious-cum-racial subjugation exhibited in South Africa in the twentieth century was labelled ‘Apartheid’. Wrongly founded on a South African Lutheran (Biblical) premise (especially encouraged by the South African Dutch Reformed Church), apartheid became a state policy. All blacks (the original owners of the land) became subjugated, second-class citizens. ‘Apartheid’, a word in Dutch and Afrikaans (two South African languages of the whites), which means “separate” and “separateness” respectively, is defined by Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia, as: “‘the status of being apart’ was a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation [. . .] under which the rights of the majority black inhabitants of South Africa were curtailed and white supremacy and Afrikaner minority rule was maintained”. Elucidating, Davis (2009) writes:

The apartheid laws classified people according to three major racial groups – white; Bantu, or black Africans; and Coloured, or people of mixed descent. Later, Asians, or Indians and Pakistanis, were added

as a fourth category. The laws determined where members of each group could live, what jobs they could hold, and what type of education they could receive. Laws prohibited most social contact between races, authorized segregated public facilities, and denied any representation of non-whites in the national government. People who openly opposed apartheid were considered communists and the government passed strict security legislation which in effect turned South Africa into a police state.

As André Brink (1993) posits, this researcher also thinks, in this paper, that it is time to take a retrospective look at apartheid through Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Apartheid was founded on sociological inferences stipulated by the whites. Therefore, the blacks, and a few whites and coloureds who opposed and fought the policy, had to establish new but opposing sociologically-oriented mythotypes based on socio-political and economic premises. This paper clarifies and portrays these mythotypes as important weaponry in the struggle against oppressive regimes as they were successfully utilized against the South African apartheid policy. Writing on Ontogenic Mythotypes, G. Charles Andersen (<http://mythotypes.com/index.htm>) posits that mythotypes are

encapsulated summary systems of cultural, family and personal stories containing patterns and structural elements that convey important psychic information for both senders and receivers. Most commonly, these Mythotypes are stories of gods, heroes, legends and unusual creatures. The influence they can exercise is not always benign, and can often be characterized as "control." Frequently these Mythotypes are attached to archetypes that become seemingly synonymous with one another. The important thing to consider is that there are a limited number of Archetypal Energies, but a nearly infinite supply of Mythotypes. Some Mythotypes are preferred within specific cultural contexts, while another culture can easily attach a different gender and story to the same Archetypal Energy.

A sociological in-text analysis of the play is the examination tool for this paper. It reflects on and opens the mainly introverted and extremely symbolic scenes. The reader is introduced to the workings of apartheid: its overt and covert social, political, psychological and economic effects. These are shown in the lives of the blacks, who comprised the highest population group in the country (but suffered the most). The text, also, albeit indirectly, points out new mythical ways of fighting and gaining freedom within and outside of the system.

Textually, Styles tells the audience he became a photographer to the chagrin of his father and family (this allows him to be an independent man). Sizwe Bansi comes in wanting his photograph taken with the false name, Robert Zwilinzima. The photo becomes a still photograph when taken. Through it, Sizwe is able to communicate with his wife, who he had not seen for a long time after leaving King William's Town, his native place, for Port Elizabeth to look for a job. Here, in a few days, he would be deported by the authority as he does not have a job or the permission to seek one. In secret, therefore, he lives with a friend of a friend, Buntu. Sizwe and Buntu discover the dead body of Robert. What becomes useful to them, especially Sizwe, is the dead man's work-seeker's permit. With this, Sizwe can stay in town and look for a responsible job. It also means that he, as 'Sizwe', must effectively die. This situation is turned into reality as the papers of Sizwe are burnt

and those of Robert are effectively forged into becoming Sizwe's. In all of these events, the effects of apartheid are felt and portrayed, not only through the characters, but also through the dialogue, setting, thematic focus and plot

According to Campbell (1968), myths serve four functions: mystical, cosmological, pedagogical and sociological. This paper is mainly concerned with the last function – sociological – and in a minor way with the pedagogical aspect. The sociological function creates, supports, opposes and encourages all types of social orders. It allows a society to create and recreate mythotypes that are relevant to its (under)development according to its pace and choices. Therefore, while societal oppressors generate and utilize 'oppressive' myths, the oppressed are also encouraged to reconstruct these to suit their own purpose: the gaining of freedom. In agreement, Malinowski (1992), a functionalist mythologist, posits that myths chart ways for social actions. In this line of argument, while answering the question, "What is Myth?", Magoulick (2013) opines that "Myths serve to explain and encourage world view and good action within society." They are usually derived from the basic human fables, actions, foibles and beliefs prevalent in different but specific (past and present) civilizations. These are originated, archetypically, from a common human psychic pool source. Jung (1934: 263) states that "man carries his social imperatives within himself, *a priori*, as an inborn necessity." It, therefore, becomes universal to link myths to different nations, peoples and civilizations. Though the story-lines and characterizations might be slightly different, the thematic focuses are usually the same (Campbell 1968). In looking at the South African apartheid problem, this paper maintains that racial discriminatory happenings in that country were not new to human civilization. This is the reason apartheid mythotypes are sourceable from that common human pool, and relevant not only to its derived environment, South Africa, but to all humans. The mythopoeic fight and struggle for freedom from oppression has come under different nomenclatures (Osofisan's *Morountodun*, wa Thiong'o and Mugo's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, Hussein's *Kinjeketile*), but this paper has compressed most under a few named mythotypes as exemplified in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

Historically, Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani, through a workshop endeavour, wrote the play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. The text, which does not address apartheid overtly, utilizes various technicalities to express aversion and proffer solutions to the policy of racial segregation. The play sprouts from, and is linked to, protest and struggle theatre. This guerrilla theatre is depicted in the text's make-up, where plays are staged spontaneously and moved around. During the workshops that added flesh to the play, and the other two plays in the *Statement* collection, Wikipedia reports:

the audience used ... crying and interjecting. The plays were workshopped ... used the feedback to improve the play.... When he (Buntu) debates how Sizwe would effectively "die" and whether the sacrifice would be worth it the audience would cry out, "Go on. Do it" because they appreciated that without a pass you were effectively a non-entity.

This extends to the setting of the play, which is Brechtian in orientation: austere, effective, utility-oriented, with a reduction in the audience's emotional involvement (the *verfremdungseffekt*). This

sparse and spatial setting facilitates the continuous textual actions. According to Wikipedia, “sets and props were improvised from whatever was available, which helps to explain the minimalist sets that productions of these plays utilize”. There is just one basic setting on which all the actions and dialogues are super-imposed. This is Styles’ Photographic Studio in the African township of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. Throughout, the major stage description that subsists for the play runs thus:

Styles Photographic Studio in the African township of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. Positioned prominently, the name-board: Underneath this is a display of various sizes. Centre stage, a table and chair ... used for photographs because a camera on a tripod stands ready a short distance away. There is also another table, or desk, with odds and ends of photographic equipment and an assortment of ‘props’ for photographs.

The setting ... and ... scenes should be as simple as possible so that the action can be continuous.

(Sizwe Bansi, 3)

This paper establishes the link between a people’s understanding of their oppressed position and their mind-set in finding ways out of it. It uses *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* as a tool to affirm that if a people can create new focuses and new myths in their struggle, freedom might not be too far from them.

Oppression through Mythotypes

The play is a reflection of the apartheid problems Blacks faced and the manners they went about solving them. It portrays what the future portended and how they could go about achieving their dream of freedom. In their struggle against the policy, the blacks endeavoured to create many subtle ways. These became mythic as they were derivatives from their traditional cultures. These reflections of their beliefs portray the how, when, what and where the struggle would take place. Mostly, these mythotypes were understood by all, as they were people-oriented and sociologically derived. This play, according to McDonald (2006:10),

becomes all the more powerful by dint of its basis on myths that have entered the human psyche.

As Freud noted with the myth of Oedipus, there are certain myths that take up residence in the human mind and soul because they reflect primitive urges.

A mythic issue played out in the text is the connection between industrialization, civilization and apartheid. In this ‘modern’ world of South Africa, the words ‘Serf’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Serfdom’ are anomalies but are synonymised in the blacks (‘boys’), the whites (‘baas’) and the industries (the Ford Motor Plant and others), respectively. This situation is a mythical cover-up of the subjugation of the ordinary man, the conquered and the subjugated. It is an anachronistic feudal world in a supposedly industrialized and civilized country.

The car plant, an avenue of socio-economic exploitation, negates any development the blacks

might ever seek in a world controlled by the whites. With its expansion, the black workers would still not benefit. Styles states: “Car plant expansion, 1.5 million rand plan. *Ja*. I’ll tell you what that means [...] more machines, bigger buildings [...] never any expansion to the pay-pocket. Make me fed-up” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 3). It is only when those in charge pay visits that life, temporarily, changes for the over-worked but underpaid servile workers. These types of visits, usually fun-fares, produce nothing. The visit of “Mr. Henry Ford Junior Number two or whatever the hell he is” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 4) catches the headlines. He is “... going to see to it that the conditions of their non-white workers in Southern Africa were substantially improved” but “The talk ended in the bloody newspaper. Never in the pay-pocket” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 4). Again, the visits demand superficial changes that do not affect the lives of the workers. At Ford’s, in anticipation of the visit, surface and ordinary factory changes are implemented: general cleaning, writing and painting of alert notifications, distribution of new overalls, new tools, etc. The visitors did not even look at the workers. In the end, the workers have to make up for the lost time:

One... two... three... OUT! Into the Galaxie and gone! That’s all. Didn’t talk to me, Mr. ‘Baas’ Bradley, Line Supervisor, or anybody. He didn’t even look at the plant! And what did I see when those three Galaxies disappeared? The white staff at the main switchboard.
 ‘Double speed on the line! Make up for production lost!’ It ended up with us working harder that bloody day than ever before. Just because that big ... (*Sizwe Bansi*, 8-9).

The myth of servility and economic-deprivation, which is as ancient as man, is propagated in contemporary South Africa: a world of exploiters and the exploited, the haves and have-nots. This situation and others of its ilk are built on social deceit emanating from lack of education by the blacks. The government, through its various apartheid policies, enforces this. Though the blacks are forced to learn the language of the whites, the latter neither speak nor write those of the former. This portrays the myth of (the assumed) superiority of language and race. To converse with their conquered, therefore, translators like Styles are needed by the whites, even on temporary bases. This gives the impotent blacks, through Styles, a temporary superiority edge.

The myth of subjugation is propagated by keeping the blacks out of work. Without earning power, they become de-humanized, easily toyed with, and geographically restricted to wherever the government deems fit. Man (*Sizwe*), who has run out of time of staying in Port Elizabeth, and is ‘endorsed’ to be deported to King William’s Town, states in a letter to his wife, Nowetu:

Port Elizabeth is a big place, a very big place with lots of factories but also lots of people looking for a job like me. There are so many men, Nowetu, who have left their places because they are dry and have come here to find work. (*Sizwe Bansi*, 22)

The women are not left out of this economic disenfranchisement. Buntu’s wife “is a domestic [...] sleep-in at Kabega Park [...] only comes home weekends” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 23). Buntu’s “Your wife is not working” statement (*Sizwe Bansi*, 27) gets Man (*Sizwe*)’s desultory reply:

The place where we stay is fifteen miles from town. There is only one shop there. Baas van Wyk. He has already got a woman working for him. King William's Town is a dry place Mr. Buntu [...] very small and too many people. (*Sizwe Bansi*, 27)

Only the conquerors have the economic power to employ. If the black men and women are not employed, then they become non-persons. This is the main thrust of the apartheid policy and system. This myth of oppression, a façade for under-developing and under-industrializing the blacks and their civilization, is perpetrated through the system, and iconized through various encoded economic symbols.

Another mythic issue consists of the absurdities prevalent in the apartheid world. This political dramatic text is a concretized illusion that realizes itself through the lives of the concerned blacks. In nearly all mythic stories, the absurd becomes employable in the storyteller's hands. This creates larger-than-life scenarios authenticating the cosmogonic inference and reference to the lives of the people. The absurd hero, Styles, not only encounters other absurd characters, he demonstrates absurdist tendencies and actions. These are in the guise of portraying the irrationality of, and the inherent failure embedded in, the apartheid system. The playwrights postulate that apartheid would fail just like all other xenophobic philosophies from eternity had.

The general absurdities cut across the characters (abstract and concrete), the scenes, the actions, the surreal thematic focus and the sparse setting. This situation starts with Styles' struggle to get control of his shop by attacking the cockroaches with the insecticide, Doom. Escaping this extermination process, the cockroaches, with a 'leader' – Old Professor – , organize a meeting and are inoculated: "Brothers, we face a problem of serious pollution [...] contamination! The menace appears to be called Doom! I have recommended a general inoculation of the whole community" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 11). The insecticide does not kill them. The improbable did the job: a little cat, Blackie, as in the South African "township, cats are insect-eaters" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 12). Before all these, Styles had heard the cockroaches conversing and relegating his actions, against them, into the dustbin. As the villains, they are outwitted like in any mythic story: heroes, like Styles, use unethical and unconventional means to win their adversaries and wars.

Other characters, imaginary but concrete, are dredged from the memories of Buntu, Sizwe and Styles (especially). Thus, the text's theory of concrete illusion is established. This includes the cards and movies taken. The audience sees and understands the majority of the events through Styles' imaginary pictorial anecdotes and descriptions. This imagery is painted and concretised: the audience 'feel' these card and movie characters. Through the movie, Man (Sizwe) brings the play's second cycle alive. Becoming a reality, Sizwe walks out of the picture (through the instrumentality of Man) while dictating a letter to his wife, Nowetu. At the end, his movie-picture is taken. The more bizarre the actions and scenes, the more effective the thematic focus and direction become.

In death, Outa Jacob fulfils the "terms of his contract with God" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 28). Death and dying, a contract between a human and God, is only executed when the human dies. The human cannot escape because "wherever Man is, or whatever he does, he is never without his faithful companion, Death" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 28). This is likened to the Native Identity Card coerced on the

blacks. It must always be on them: dead or alive. Freedom is achieved only when they are dead, having “reached Home The only time we’ll find peace is when they dig a hole for us and press our face into the earth” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 28).

Another mythic issue, the loss and acquisition of identity encoded in the dream of reality and freedom, is textually concretised. The apartheid system is configured to achieve the depersonalization, deprivation and dehumanization of the blacks and other minority populace. To achieve this, the policy attacks different levels of the people’s consciousness and psyche.

The languages of the ethnically diverse blacks become anathema. They are not to be spoken in official and educational environments. With this, the blacks are deprived of their hereditary communicative media. Therefore, the only time Styles is ‘employed’ as a translator becomes for him a time of vengeance. But it is an ineffectual strike at the policy. The whites neither speak nor write the language(s) of the blacks. On the other hand, the blacks must speak and write the language(s) of the whites. This situation is vividly captured in the writing scene between Styles and Baas Bradley. This language imposition is mythical: it is meant to suppress the culture and traditions of the conquered. Therefore, getting Baas Bradley in a kneeling position while he stands, gives Styles his own pound of flesh. With this, McDonald (2006:18) suggests:

John and Winston used the literature imported by their colonial “masters” as a weapon for counterattack. Ironically, this literature [. . .] has subverted the colonial masters’ intentions of teaching them the meaning of human rights rather than playing the pacifying and “civilizing” role the colonizers intended.

Economically, the dictum is that of ‘he who pays the piper dictates the tune.’ The whites own the major economic and employing avenues. The blacks are at their mercies and caprices. Baas Bradley says that Mr. Henry Ford Junior, “the owner of this place, is going to visit us. Mr. Ford is the big Baas. He owns the plant and everything in it” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 7). In the Kafkaesque discussion between Man and Buntu about employment, it is discovered that without a white’s legal backing, hardly can a black get any profitable job.

Buntu: Do you know any white man who’s prepared to give you a job?

Man: No. I don’t know any white man.

Buntu: Pity. We might have been able to work something out then. You talk to the white man, you see, and ask him to write a letter saying he’s got a job for you. (*Sizwe Bansi*, 25)

With this letter, Man will still need to go through a bureaucratic labyrinth before being excluded from ‘raids.’ Without this, the only options left are the mines where the whites “don’t worry about Influx Control”, as “many black men get killed when the rocks fall. You can die there” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 26). Those who work in established institutions, like Ford Motors, get a “Gold-wrist watch in twenty-five years’ time when they sign you off because you’re too old for anything anymore” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 9). Clarifying this situation, which affected South African blacks and is still affecting most citizens on the African continent, as instituted by the colonial rulers and neo-colonial institutions,

Walter Rodney (1972:122) states:

The element of subordination and dependence is crucial to an understanding of African underdevelopment today . . . It is also worth noting that there is a type of false or pseudo integration which is a camouflage for development.

The Influx Control, a negatively skewed policy of repatriation, which limits and cuts off blacks from lucrative economic environments and cities, employs the raiding system to flush out and return them to their original dead-ends. Icons of servility and repression are established in mythic archetypal symbols falsely enmeshed in high population number and control policies. Blacks are raided, as happens to Man (Sizwe). This keeps them pinned to specific environments: their rights to movement, and by extension, to good jobs is denied. Dennis Brutus (Solanke, 2005: 6), the South Africa poet, in his rebellious poem, “A troubadour I traverse . . .” succinctly captures this state of affairs:

A troubadour, **I traverse all my land**
 exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest
 probing in motion sweeter far than rest
 her secret thickets with an amorous hand:
 and I have laughed, **disdaining those who banned inquiry and**
movement (Bold mine)

The ordinary man is immersed in the apartheid world through various documentations. To be recognized as a person, he must have a social number on his Native Identification Card: “It’s more important than your name” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 29). It must always be on the black wherever he is, or if he gets arrested. Without it, he is a non-person, as the “white man at the Labour Bureau takes the book, looks at it – doesn’t look at you!” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 25). The passbook allows him to stay in specific places the government deems fit: “But if that book says go, you go” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 24). His pink card is his record card at the Labour Bureau. According to Buntu, “Your whole bloody life is written down on that” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 24). To become a trader, a Hawker’s License must be acquired. A Residence Permit, which allows one to stay in a place and escape raids, must be signed. Buntu elaborates the torturous, if not impossible, process of getting this (*Sizwe Bansi*, 25-26). Styles had to get official permission before opening and operating his photographic studio. The black man must do all these things to stay out of trouble. But Man expounds on the impossibility of not falling into trouble: “A Blackman stay out of trouble? Impossible, Buntu. Our skin is trouble” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 43).

The blacks are depersonalized, debased, de-organized and de-humanized. Their personalities become that of the slave, and they must always “hide your feelings” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 7); “clean your face” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 42); and “adopt a fawning, servile pose in front of the white man” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 43). The whites see majority of the blacks as thieves: “the old Security Guard [...] who every time he saw a black man walk past with his hands in his pocket [...] saw another spark-plug walk out of the plant” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 8). In his mocking and satirical translation for Baas Bradley, Styles

captures it all:

Gentlemen, he says that when the door opens and his grandmother walks in you must see to it that you are wearing a mask of smiles. Hide your true feelings, brothers. You must sing. The joyous songs of the days of old before we had fools like this one next to me to worry about. (*Sizwe Bansi*, 7)

To achieve individual, group, national and racial identity, the blacks and the other minority groups, at different levels and with different results, attack and attempt to alleviate the effects of the apartheid system on their communal life. Through these, their dream of freedom could be achieved either in the long or short term. Styles breaks from the ordinary track, becomes self-employed, making his photographic studio “a story-room of dreams” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 12) for himself and his people. He becomes the mythic hero serving as a conduit for people’s dreams and achievements (personal or group). An example of this achievement is the academic man who gets a standard six certificate at the age of forty-eight after seven years of study (he would become a boss-boy) and who tells Styles: “**But I am not finished.** I’m going to take up for the Junior Certificate, then Matric [...] and you watch, Mr. Styles. **One day I walk out of my house, graduate, self-made**” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 14) (Bold mine).

Styles keeps history alive through the family cards he takes. A photo, consisting of “my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, their wives and husbands, our children. Twenty-seven of us” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 15), captures, through the grandfather, the past, present and future of the African world. Through Styles, Man as Sizwe dies but resurrects as Robert, achieving temporary psycho-cultural freedom for himself and his family. Buntu, who understands the policy, meets Sizwe through and in the picture, and helps refocuses Sizwe’s consciousness and ego to living within and accepting the system. Styles’ father fought for South Africa in the Second World War, “So that this country and all the others could stay Free” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 17). On returning, he is denied the freedom he risked his life to get for others. In an ironic compensation, he is given a scoff-tin and a bicycle. His freedom ends “in a rotten old suitcase amongst some of his old rags” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 19) when he dies.

Politically, the struggle leads to the independence of a part of the country. This is farcical and of no use, as explained by Man: “when a car passes or the wind blows up the dust, Ciskeian Independence makes you cough put a man in a pondok and call that independence? ... Ciskeian independence is shit!” (*Sizwe Bansi*, 31). This type of pseudo neo-colonialism was practiced by a few colonial governments which ruled the various Africa countries. Kenya got her ‘majimboism’, and Nigeria her regional governments. This policy of region-by-region, district by district, or piecemeal independence was meant to swindle the people into believing that independence had been given. It implanted separation and tribal segregation among the people. Reacting to this type of situation, Kimathi, the hero in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo (1976:46), exclaims:

Would you too call the war for national liberation a regional movement? What has colonialism done to your thinking? Hear me. Kenya is one indivisible whole. The cause we fight for is larger than provinces: it shatters ethnic barriers. It is a whole people’s cause.

In their exploration of the myth of oppression, Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani utilize multifarious nomenclatures. These portray the oppressed and the oppressors. 'Baas' and 'Makulu Baas' are used for whites only. They demonstrate the existence and omnipresence of the apartheid system, just like in George Orwell's *1984*, where Big Brother, omnipresent-like, straddles Oceania. The blacks are brainwashed to a level that when Bansi is addressed as 'Mister' (*Sizwe Bansi*, 29), he is shocked into laughter, and questions: 'How can a black like him be referred to as Mister Bansi?' Generally, the black adults are called 'boys', irrespective of age, by any white (also irrespective of age): "[...] his little child calls you 'Boy' [...] you a man, circumcised with a wife and four children" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 38).

The 'respect' for any black comes when he is promoted at work. He becomes and is called "boss-boy" (the head of the boys). Due to all these, Buntu advocates a non-entity, no-name situation for all South African blacks. Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani's agree. This is the main reason the playwrights use Man (without a specific name) to showcase his belief that freedom is achievable by any or all the blacks. Again, the name, Styles, comes in the plurality, with the intention that this main character represents the different forms of oppression and freedom the blacks undergo and can achieve, respectively. All names are useless as all blacks are "ghosts" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 38) to the whites. To Buntu, therefore, "Shit on names, man! To hell with them if in exchange you can get a piece of bread for your stomach and a blanket in winter" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 43). What is necessary and important is staying alive and achieving one's goals within the system. This, in the final analysis, is why Bansi is called 'Sizwe', translated as 'Brother'. Brother Bansi dies, loses his name, but resurrects with another name, becoming a ghost with the ability to live within the system. According to Buntu, "All I'm saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 38).

Two individuals/actors play the three characters involved in the play. With this experimentation, play-acting and role-play come in. In the mythic world, heroes and villains are usually few, with a high number of supporting staff and hangers-on. Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani utilize this technique to portray the non-importance of independence, if and when one is still dependent on another or on an external force (individual/group or official/unofficial) apart from oneself (*Kinjeketile*, 1970). On the other hand, it becomes an initiatory tool in the hands of Buntu in the hypnotization and conviction of Sizwe. Through it, the oppressed can for a time become free; Styles translates for Bradley; Sizwe becomes Robert. Surmising, Brink (1993:10) posits:

It represents, in fact, the most basic function of the writer in a closed society where "normal" artistic creation is inhibited and everything is politicized: the need to record, the need to bear witness. It is the primary reaction, which precedes all resistance.

Solutions in Mythotypes

The text advocates a few ways out of the imbroglio. The cat that eats cockroaches depicts a struggle, a fighting policy and strategy unlike those of the past. This is exemplified in how Sizwe becomes

Robert. Returning from Sky's place in the night, Sizwe and Buntu get lost. After debating how to move, they took, according to the text's direction, "**An appropriate change in direction.** They continue walking and eventually arrive at a square, with roads, leading off in many directions" (*Sizwe Bansi*, 31) (Bold mine). From here, Buntu not only finds the way, but he also discovers the body of Robert. Through this, Sizwe gets his new lease on life. This portends a future of independence and freedom for the people from the ashes of their former struggles and dead lives.

Another freedom-related mythic issue thrashed out in the text dictates that in the contemporary life envisioned in modern revolutions, there is the demystification of the supernatural forces in man's struggle for freedom. This focus shows explicitly the complexity of man's ambivalence and contradiction: man as man's enemy and friend, oppressor and saviour, concurrently. Man is chained and bound by man: it is only man that can release man from his oppressive psycho-social, political and economic bondage. The tools of unbinding himself surround him: he only needs to be creative, determined and focused.

When Styles finds cockroaches inhabiting his new shop he directly goes for the obvious solution: an insecticide. In his failure, creativeness and a change in his fighting strategy comes into play. He finds a lasting solution to his *periplaneta americana* problem as he comes across a cat that could do the job. Metaphorically, the cat is suggestive of new solutions black South Africans must look for. It is prophetic because it was not until all the military and violent struggles ended and dialogue ensued that relief came for South Africa.

To make Sizwe come alive in Robert, no ritualistic hullabaloo and religious chants are needed. The transformation becomes modern through a change of official identification numbers and information encompassed in an official document. Calling on gods to effect spiritual and physical changes in the human environment no longer hold total sway. Man must dance to the tune of his contemporary world; he must look into and outside of himself while consigning the gods to the nether world. The apartheid problem, falsely rooted in Christian doctrine, was created by men (legitimized during the tenure of the South African President, Dr. Daniel Malan in 1948 and maintained by other prime ministers and presidents like Hendrik Verwoerd, B. J Vorster and Pieter Botha). It was, therefore, pertinent for it to be resolved by men (through the instrumentalities of leaders like Frederik Willem de Klerk, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki). Spiritual aids were not very much needed, but the physical struggle and oneness of the people were.

Conclusion

Oppressors get into people's lives through various avenues: religion, culture, diplomatic pacts and deals, deceit, trade, propaganda, defeat in war and other ways. This myth of oppression has stayed with man for eons. In the developing African world, oppressors have been internal and external (Alain 2000). The internal ones have been Africans, especially after the different countries got independence from their colonial rulers; a sort of self-imposed neo-colonialism. The external ones have been colonizers of different types and from different countries of other continents. Both use

oppressive tools to suppress the people: all based on false propaganda and double talk. The attempt is always to break and split the societies concerned.

Styles, Sizwe and Buntu, the major and symbolic characters, personally seek ways out for themselves and their people in this constricted, apartheid environment. Athol Fugard, Wiston Ntshona and John Kani, therefore, succeed in intertwining the characters and the thematic focus of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* with mythical techniques and icons. They succeed in exposing and exploiting the mythical within an oppressive society. This results in the condemnation of apartheid without a mention of it. One can agree with Rich (2002) that the text is “lyrical in design, shattering in impact.” The playwrights have been able to examine the various aspects of the political imbroglio of their society with penetrative and in-depth analytical dramatic scenes, icons and different mythotypes.

Styles is the griot telling the story of his people. It is through him, his actions and life that acquaintance is made with all facets of apartheid. The future is also predicated on him. He, therefore, represents not only for himself but also for his race and nation an achievable future; free of racial prejudice and oppression. This, in practice, agrees with Brink’s (1993:6) position: “Inasmuch as individual action can make a difference, Sizwe Bansi is far more hopeful and optimistic.” The text prophesies the future of apartheid, optimistically professing new ways and methods of achieving freedom. These in reality have happened. For the hero-characters, Begiebing’s (1984: 202) summation is relevant here: “By his violent journey into a mysterious and misunderstood dimension, the hero gains a wisdom that could, but probably will not, be the salvation of his species”. Sizwe and the other characters are able to point the way(s) out for their people. They are able to experience and to gain the ‘wisdom’ to help their society through personal and group adventures.

References

- Alain, R. 2000. *Ebrahim Hussein: Swahili Theatre and Individualism*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki naNyota Publishers.
- Andersen Charles G. “Ontogenic Mythotypes”. <http://mythotypes.com/index.htm>. (26 June 2015)
- Begiebing, Robert J. 1984. “The Mythic Hero In H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*.” *Essays In Literature* 11.2. 201-210. America: Western Illinois University.
- Brink, Andre. 1993. “No Way Out.” *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and the Dilemma of Political Drama in South Africa. Athol Fugard Issue. America: *Twentieth Century Literature*. Winter. Vol 39, Nov.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1968. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Davis, Richard. H. 2008. “Apartheid.” Microsoft®Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Fugard, Athol, Ntshona, Wiston and Kani, John. 1974. *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hussein, Ebrahim. N. 1970. *Kinjeketile*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.
- Jung, C.G. 1934. *Collected Papers In Analytical Psychology*. London: Balliere, Tindall & Cox.
- Magoullick, Mary. 2013. “What Is Myth.” www.faculty.de.gsc.edu/~mmagouli/demyth.htm. (4 April 2013).

- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1992 *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, Inc.
- McDonald, M. 2006. "The Return of the Myth: Athol Fugard and the Classics." *Akroterion* 51. 1-19.
- Orwell, George. 1950. *1984*. New York: Signet Book.
- Osofisan, F. 1982. *Morountodun and Other Plays*. Nigeria: Longman
- Rich, Frank. 2002. www.drama.cmu.edu/News&Events/Calendar. (13 February, 2013).
- Rodney, Walter. 1972:122. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.
- Solanke, S. O. 2005: 6. *28 Poetic Voices*. Nigeria: Blue Grass Ventures.
- wa Thiong'o, N and Mugo, M. G. 1976. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. London: Heinemann.
- Wikipedia.org. 2013. www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athol_Fugard. (10 February 2013).
- Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia. 2013. "Apartheid in South Africa." www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid_in_South_Africa. (26 March 2013)

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk is a teacher in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Białystok. Her area of academic interest is Canadian and American literature. E-mail address: ewefel@wp.pl

Jerzy Kamionowski is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Białystok, Poland. He is the author of two books: *Głosy z "dzikiej strefy"* (Voices from the "wild zone") (2011) on the poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Audre Lorde, and *New Wine in Old Bottles. Angela Carter's Fiction* (2000). He has published articles on women and African American writers and postmodernist novelists. He has also co-edited three volumes of critical essays on American women poets: *Piękniejszy dom od Prozy* (A Fairer House than Prose) (2005), *O wiele więcej Okien* (More numerous of Windows) (2008), and *Drzwi szerzej Otworzyć* (Superior – for Doors) (2011). E-mail address: kamion1@gazeta.pl

Grzegorz Moroz is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Białystok. He teaches survey courses of English Literature, Introduction to Literary Studies and other related courses. His research interests concentrate, on the one hand, around the issues connected with the history and theory of travel writing, and, on the other, on the works and life on Aldous Huxley. He has recently published a book *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen: Constructing Male Narrative Personae in British Travel Books, from the Beginnings to the Second World War* (Peter Lang Verlag). E-mail address: grzes.furbia@wp.pl

Stephen Oladele Solanke (Ph.D.) is a lecturer of Oral Literature and African Literature at the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Elizade University, Ilaramokin, Ondo State, Nigeria. His teaching fields encompass African Prose, Poetry and Drama, Creative Writing, General Oral Literature and African Oral Literature among others. E-mail address: myacada@gmail.com

